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Burlesque: Music, Minstrelsy, and Mimetic Resistance

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Burlesque: Music, Minstrelsy, and Mimetic Resistance

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Abstract

Burlesque: Music, Minstrelsy, and Mimetic Resistance

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My project can be read as an intervention that aims to disrupt the "innocence" of burlesque's dominant historical narratives, where burlesque is fashioned as related to minstrelsy but not as minstrelsy. A discussion of the White women as minstrel performers is lacking in the available burlesque histories because they have not addressed the meanings of musical sounds and movements, elements that constitute the core of burlesque. Using music as a lens to re-evaluate the meanings of burlesque performance, I show how burlesque, like minstrelsy, has functioned on the historical erasure of Black and Brown bodies. In burlesque, White women performers have predicated their departures from norms of White femininity on racist performances of "black"-ness. These minstrel performances were enabled by a White fetishization of musical sounds and movements coded Black or "Other." Building on the work of Jayna Brown and Sherrie Tucker, and responding to Susanne Cusick's call to address how musical performances might be read productively through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I foreground

music and embodiment to ask: How do burlesque artists perform and (re)perform gender, sexuality, and race?

To unpack this question, I first look at historical (re)presentations of burlesque performance and music. After this historical section, I read key scenes from classic era films featuring burlesque music and performance, using semiotics to argue that these performances can be read as an extension of blackface minstrelsy. I discuss how certain jazz-influenced musical devices - horn smears, belting or "loud" singing, angular or jerky dancing - primarily functioned to signal "black"-ness, sex, and modernity to the intended White audience/spectator. In the next chapter, I examine the extent to which neo-burlesque could be considered a queering of burlesque by doing close readings of contemporary burlesque performances. From here, I look more critically at how racial and genre boundaries are created and maintained within contemporary burlesque, resulting in a new burlesque normativity. Finally, I highlight the work being done by burlesque performers of color who work within and against burlesque's dominant ideologies, subverting racist representations of people of color through mimetic resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

In March of 2013 I attended a burlesque dance class entitled "Musicality and Personality," not knowing quite what to expect. The structure of the class followed a form fairly standard for any style of dance class: warm-ups, an introduction to the basic movements, putting these movements to music, and finally connecting multiple movements to choreograph a song. During the class, the instructor claimed on more than one occasion that it was "natural" to move our bodies in certain ways to particular songs and sounds. After we had learned how to perform some basic burlesque moves – "bumps," or hip thrusts, and "grinds," slow rotations of the hips from one side to the other - the instructor turned on the music, a song that prominently featured horns. According to the instructor, you could "hear" when you were supposed to bump and when you were supposed to grind. Staccato horn hits, for her, signaled bumps, while horn slides signaled grinds. After the class, driving home with a friend, my mind was spinning as I thought through what had just happened. With the class, which took place in an established Austin dance studio, burlesque had found its place within the establishment and movements were being codified and taught by rote. Yet even as they were being actively taught, the instructor insisted that our bodies would naturally want to respond with these movements when exposed to certain sounds. For the standard burlesque moves, these sounds were always from jazz or jazz-influenced songs. The one modal, "exotic" song the instructor played was chosen for us to practice belly dance. The instructor clarified that burlesque bellydancing is not "authentic," but came from "early

burlesque girls [who] knew bellydance was sexy and tried to imitate [it] as best they could". The burlesque approximation was supposed to feel more natural for us when accompanied by modal music. That certain sounds are imagined to imply and even compel specific body movements better than other sounds has been a prevalent discourse throughout the history of burlesque performance. These sounds are typically associated with Black musical forms like jazz or with "Other" musical styles, while the majority of contemporary burlesque performers are White women. Unpacking the racial and gender dynamics of this relationship between musical sound and movement has increasingly oriented my work on burlesque performance.

My project can be read as an intervention that aims to disrupt the "innocence" of burlesque's dominant historical narratives, where burlesque is fashioned as related to minstrelsy but not as minstrelsy, by focusing on the musical choices made in performances. I argue that it is precisely by listening to the music that we can begin to unpack and look more critically at what racial meanings are being transmitted through burlesque performance. Building on the work of Jayna Brown and Sherrie Tucker, and responding to Susanne Cusick's call to address how musical performances might be read productively through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I foreground music and embodiment in burlesque performances to ask: How do burlesque artists perform and (re)perform gender, sexuality, and race?

Contemporary burlesque, a revival movement sometimes referred to as neo-burlesque, traces its resurgent moment to the early 1990s. Performers draw from various repertoires, including striptease, performance art, circus acts, comedy, drag, and camp,

usually performing their routine to a musical recording. Musical selections are often chosen to challenge the audience's expectations about what burlesque music is, but a nostalgia for burlesque of the past ensures that the "traditional" styles of songs - usually jazz- or blues-inspired - constitute a significant portion of burlesque acts. A historically working class, "low-brow" form of entertainment, burlesque remains an understudied genre. Richard Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991), provides an insightful account of burlesque's early years and transformations, while Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004) offers a good overview of contemporary burlesque.

I first became interested in burlesque in the fall of 2011 upon seeing the documentary *Dirty Martini and the New Burlesque* (2010), a screening which was followed by my first contemporary burlesque show. I had heard about neo-burlesque but, with a perspective influenced by second-wave feminism, judged it to be degrading and exclusively oriented towards the male gaze "like stripping," which I also considered to be degrading at the time. However, that fall was a time when my own personal politics were transitioning to third-wave feminist and queer, and after seeing the film and performances my opinion of burlesque changed dramatically. I now saw burlesque as fun, campy, and queer, and identified with what I saw as its radical, revolutionary potential. Throughout my master's degree coursework, I continued to pursue projects exploring neo-burlesque and began to approach burlesque from a more critical rather than celebratory perspective as I recognized that not all contemporary burlesque was queer or politically radical and

that the majority of burlesque performers were White, suggesting a systemic or institutional racism.

There is a general lack of queer and feminist ethnomusicological scholarship, and I saw a project on contemporary burlesque as an opportunity to begin to fill in those gaps. I realized that I would need to research the historical iterations of burlesque in America to better contextualize the work I was doing, and it was during this exploration that I recognized minstrelsy's early and continued influence on burlesque. The works I used as my primary sources include: Bernard Sobel's two works on burlesque, *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days* (1931) and *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (1956); Robert Allen's volume on early American burlesque, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991); Eric Lott's work on minstrelsy, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993); and Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004), which provides a historical grounding but primarily focuses on contemporary burlesque. These sources historicize burlesque with a narrative trajectory that typically begins in mid-nineteenth century America; they include photographs of early and contemporary burlesque; and Allen's volume provides a detailed analysis of early burlesque's social meanings. However, these sources also de-emphasize burlesque's incorporation of the minstrel show's content and do not look at the music as a site of social meaning or negotiation.

Bernard Sobel (1887-1964), who had worked as a publicist for Florenz Ziegfeld, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and many famous actors and producers (Berenbaum 2007: 699), authored the two earliest surveys of burlesque's history: *Burleycue: An Underground*

History of Burlesque Days (1931) and *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (1956). In both works, Sobel writes from a place of nostalgia for burlesque of the "Golden Age", which he dates to roughly 1900-1910 and describes as "the days that middle-aged men now recall wistfully and that young men discuss boastfully" (Sobel 1931: 134). He contrasts this era of burlesque with the state of burlesque at the time of publishing, which in *Burleycue* he criticizes as being centered solely on stripping and nudity, commenting that "Those who have never known anything better seem to enjoy themselves" (Ibid.: 265).

In *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days* (1931), Sobel discusses burlesque's early history in a series of very short chapters arranged in a narrative trajectory that runs from its "Origins" through "The Modern Burlesque Show," and closes with a chapter on "Social Significance". The volume features a number of chapters devoted to individuals connected to burlesque and is illustrated with pictures, playbills and photographs. While no sources are cited for the text, Sobel includes a page crediting the majority of the photographs to the collections of Albert Davis and the additional material to Joel Sayre, Herbert Minsky, Johnny de Sylva and Daniel Doran. The chapters provide information on a number of burlesque shows, often with dates, conventions of burlesque, and burlesque managerial and financial practices.

Bernard Sobel's *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (1956) lifts much of the text from *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days* but also includes Sobel's reflections on how burlesque changed with the Great Depression and World War II. As the title implies, this volume is also amply illustrated with photographs and a few drawings. While many of the photographs are subtitled without reference to their source,

and a few are credited to personal collections, the majority of photographs that include citations come from three sources: the Museum of the City of New York, Culver Service, and the Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library. The book is organized more or less chronologically, and the nostalgic longing for the burlesque of an earlier era pervades even the chapter titles. Beginning with a chapter entitled "As It Was in the Beginning", Sobel closes this work with the chapter "Decline and Fall". He provides an example of how a typical burlesque show may have been presented in a chapter entitled "The Complete Show" and discusses burlesque's intersections with and influences on other contemporary popular genres and institutions: musical theatre, vaudeville, variety, minstrelsy, Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, and music-hall.

Robert Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991) is one of the only book-length scholarly works on American burlesque and in my opinion represents the most cogent study currently available. Allen focuses on burlesque's introduction to America in the nineteenth century, framing Lydia Thompson and her British burlesque's troupe first American production, Ixion, as a critical incipient moment for burlesque in America. In this work, he scrutinizes the historical context and meanings of burlesque to the performers and audiences. He argues that burlesque staged an inversion of both Victorian ideals of femininity and of bourgeois notions of the self. In relation to Lydia Thompson, for instance, "There was nothing of the frail, ethereal, steel-engraving lady about her. Her corseted costume emphasized her bust, hips, and legs, calling attention to the markers of sexual difference the sentimental costume kept hidden" (Allen 1991: 138). Regarding bourgeois notions of self and rationality, burlesque

"…threatened to rupture the norms of bourgeois culture through its celebration of an upside-down version of that world. Above all, what burlesque denied was the legitimacy of rationality and its power to impose order and meaning" (Ibid.: 146-47). Allen's volume does reserve a final chapter for burlesque in the twentieth century, but here he also rehashes a narrative of decline. For Allen, burlesque lost its political potential as it became increasingly oriented around feminine sexual display and as burlesque performers stopped speaking during their acts.

Written just two years later, Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) explores the meanings of early blackface minstrelsy performance. Lott points to the ways in which minstrelsy, in addition to being about race, was also very much about gender and sexuality. Lott argues that to some extent, minstrelsy was predicated on the homoerotic desire white men felt for black men's bodies that drove them "To put on the cultural forms of "blackness"... to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry" (Lott 1993: 52). He writes that this homoerotic desire tied to a fear of miscegenation was evident in the ways minstrelsy traded in both "a jealous guarding of the prized white female body and a fascination with black male sexual potency that either precedes or follows it" (Ibid.: 57) and contribute to what he calls the "twitchy love" in his title "Love and Theft." Ultimately, "It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure" (Ibid.: 6).

Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004) focuses on contemporary burlesque but also features a section on burlesque's earlier history in America. Baldwin is a burlesque performer herself, and while she includes great color photographs and interesting quotations and information on burlesque, she does not use in-text citations or footnotes, making it difficult to determine where she is getting some of her information. In Baldwin's volume, she places the "Golden Age" of burlesque later than Sobel, locating it in the 1920s and 30s (Baldwin 2004: 1). In addition to chapters on the history and revival of burlesque, Baldwin presents chapters on the costuming, the different styles of burlesque, and the audience. Interspersed within the sections, Baldwin includes one-page illustrated asides on aspects of burlesque that might not fit neatly into her chapters, such as swing's relationship to burlesque, the tradition of fanciful monikers, and some troupes' refusal to admit those with "fake breasts" (Ibid.: 51).

As becomes readily apparent when reading the scholarship on burlesque and minstrelsy, the early histories of these genres are intimately connected. For instance, both Sobel and Allen discuss a late-nineteenth-century burlesque troupe named Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels (Sobel 1931: 31-39; Sobel 1956: 42-48; Allen 1991: 163-64). Baldwin includes a promotional photograph of Lydia Thompson as Robinson Crusoe alongside Willie Edouin in blackface as "her man Friday" (2004: 3), and Sobel includes several photographs of male burlesque comics in blackface. He also includes a description of how, through the early twentieth century, male burlesque comics would blacken their faces, portraying a stereotyped "black" character imported from the blackface minstrelsy stage. While he includes these descriptions and photographs of male

comics in blackface, Sobel does not interrogate the racial meaning of minstrelsy's influence on burlesque, and attempts to refute any readings that would look more critically at race in burlesque with the claim that:

> The opprobrious term 'nigger,' so hateful to the colored man, never had an ugly connotation during the burlesque heyday. It did, however, limit the comic to menial roles such as bellhops, waiters, busboys and bootblacks. Nowadays, the word 'nigger' and coon songs are taboo. Even the classic 'Ol' Man River' must be edited. (Sobel 1956: 70-71)

However, these authors discursively separate female burlesque performance from minstrelsy, as the focus there remained on the performance of female sexuality, which inverted and challenged Victorian ideals of womanhood. These sources claim that even the "Female Minstrels", pictured in one volume holding banjos (Sobel 1956), an instrument typical of the minstrel stage, merely borrowed the tripartite *form* of the minstrel show rather than the content. Perhaps because the signifier of minstrelsy here was a musical instrument rather than a blackened face, and because the subject was female rather than male, their burlesque, and burlesque generally, has been primarily read alongside minstrelsy but in contradistinction - not *as* minstrelsy.

In addition to not completely addressing the role of minstrelsy in burlesque, the current literature on burlesque does not sufficiently address the music. These accounts often gloss over the music, noting its presence or giving biographical information about the performers but not addressing how it was performed or what it might have meant to contemporary audiences. These are important lacunae because it is by unpacking the meanings of the musical sounds and movements that I read burlesque as minstrelsy.

Sobel includes five brief chapters on the music, composers, and performers of burlesque's music in *Burleycue*. With the two-page chapter "The Music of Burlesque" Sobel claims that "what corresponded to a burlesque musical score was just so much necessary filler between "bits", hootch dances, strip numbers and variety" (1931: 247) although he does point to burlesque's role in making ballads into hit songs and the involvement of Tin Pan Alley song pluggers in that process. He includes half-page biographical chapters on two burlesque composers, J. Fred Cootes and W.K. Friedlander, and a three-page chapter on singer Gus Edwards. Sobel also includes a chapter titled "Ragtime" which credits Irving Berlin and his "Alexander's Ragtime Band" with popularizing ragtime in burlesque and in America more generally.

In the chapter "Books and Music" in *A Pictorial History*, Sobel mostly repeats verbatim the text from his chapters on music in *Burleycue*, although he substitutes "jazz" in places for "ragtime". For instance, in *Burleycue* Sobel writes "Though burlesque had thus only a scattered influence on native composers, it had much to do with the inception of ragtime, generally considered a native musical idiom" (1931: 251). Then, in *A Pictorial History*, Sobel writes "But if burlesque had only a scattered influence on native composers, it had much to do with the inception of jazz, generally considered America's foremost contribution to the art world" (1956: 150). He acknowledges Louis Armstrong as a leader under whom "jazz has become a powerful medium for exploiting democracy throughout a great part of the world" (Ibid.: 151), but ultimately credits Irving Berlin as the source of jazz's popularity.

Allen includes some information about the music that was performed, but for him it is not a critical site of meaning-making except to the extent that it operates through inversion. Thus, Allen focuses on the performance of parodic versions of operas or by the waltz's introduction to the burlesque stage. In this manner, he points to the semiotic role of music in burlesque, where humor rests on the inversion of semiotic codes. However, he does not investigate what meanings in addition to parody were transmitted through the music. He provides some discussion of the instruments used by the male blackface minstrel performers in Lydia Thompson's staging of Robinson Crusoe and he provides an explanation of the audience reception of the use of the banjo by the "Female Minstrels." Near the end of the volume, Allen describes how "'unruly' female performers" were tolerated "so long as their transgressive power was channeled and defused through their construction as grotesque figures" (1991: 282), and cites Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Lizzie Miles as belters who, as contemporaries to burlesque performers Sophie Tucker and Eva Tanguay, also deployed this strategy. Allen argues that their "aggressively sexual musical discourse[s]" were "contained by virtue of their racial otherness" (Ibid.: 272-73) whereas burlesque performers who deployed this strategy usually relied on their age, size, or unattractiveness.

In *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, Baldwin includes a section dedicated to the use of music in contemporary burlesque and also mentions music's role in the historical chapter. Ostensibly drawing from Allen, Baldwin explains how Sophie Tucker and Eva Tanguay sang songs with double entendres which the audience found comedic due to their age and size. She then explains, "There were also Bessie Smith, Ethyl [sic]

Waters, and Lizzie Miles whose pointed musical sensuality was subjugated by the their [sic] "otherness" – they were African American and their ethnicity kept them out of mainstream white performance venues. However all of these women did, in their way, help to preserve and carry on a little of Lydia Thompson's spirit" (Baldwin 2004: 4). The section specifically on music explains how, while traditional burlesque was set to live music, contemporary burlesque generally relies on recorded sound. However, she does provide an overview of live contemporary burlesque bands, most of which are jazz- or blues- oriented, explaining that "The use of modern music has been hotly contested among fans and performers. Some are adamantly against the use of anything written after the 1960s" (Ibid.: 112).

Lott, the only author writing explicitly on minstrelsy, does devote critical attention to music and sound, suggesting the importance of sound in interpreting minstrelsy. In addition to a discussion of the musical instruments typically associated with minstrelsy, Lott foregrounds the importance of written accounts of musical sound in minstrelsy's origin stories. He notes how these origin stories often featured accounts of the disembodied voices of Black men singing, where the black male voice is represented as powerful and sexual and serves as a site on which minstrel performers projected their sexual fear and desire for Black male bodies. Furthermore, with the statement "Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return" (Lott 1993: 5), Lott locates blackface in the sonic world.

By not addressing these questions of meaning in relation to the music of burlesque, the burlesque authors silence any racial implications of the music's performance. Thus, I see a focus on the music as critical. Such a focus allows me to connect female burlesque performance to minstrelsy. It also allows me to point to where Black historical actors' contributions have been erased and written over in burlesque's currently imagined history in order to reinsert those names and reframe burlesque's history as one that is not just a story about White bodies.

Studies on blackface and female minstrelsy are important for revealing the role of music and dance in burlesque. As Mark A. Reid discusses in *Redefining Black Film*, "The constructive properties of blackface minstrelsy include an addresser, an imaginary 'black' object of ridicule, and an interested spectator" (1993: 20, cited in Dunne 2004: 42-43). When burlesque draws from blackface minstrelsy, music and/or dance acts as the medium that conjures imaginary "black" cultural forms and bodies, although I would argue that they are fetishized as often as ridiculed. The "black" cultural forms are imaginary here because the musicians and performers featured in these films are usually white, and the music may not reflect the aesthetics claimed by Black musicians. In the following chapters, I will use "black" to refer to Blackness as it is situated in the White imaginary. Following Guthrie Ramsey, I use the capitalized Black to refer to people who identify with a Black cultural heritage and to cultural forms that emerged from that community.

Since the 1920s, jazz and jazz-influenced songs have been the most popular musical style to accompany burlesque performance. Sherrie Tucker's work on the racist

and colonialist underpinnings of white women's jazz fandom in the film *New Orleans* (1947) begins the work of connecting White female subjects to minstrelsy by focusing on the music. The film *New Orleans* features performances by Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, but these are relegated to the background and the narrative focus is on the "uniformly bland" White characters (Bogle 1994: 147 in Tucker 2005: 1), including a White woman, Miralee Smith, who literally claims jazz as "hers." As Tucker critiques:

> These performances of bland white characters gaping at creative black musicking are enactments of power; acts facilitated in large part through a particular construction of white womanhood as unaware, or "innocent," of her social power... [W]omen-in-jazz historians like me have been far more interested in recovering women jazz musicians of any race as forgotten historical actors, than in retrieving lost histories of white women as jazz appropriators, symbolic or otherwise. Yet, acknowledging such appropriation is central to appreciating the cultural politics of a film like *New Orleans.* (2005: 2)

Tucker connects the cultural politics at play in *New Orleans* to recent scholarship on the politics of race and appropriation in music, most of which has focused on White men. She points to Krin Gabbard's identification of the recurring White male "Jazz Nerd" figure, Ingrid Monson's critique of "white hipness," which tends "to project white desires for affect, authenticity, sexuality, onto black bodies and black music" (Ibid.), and Eric Lott's "analysis of the continuation of minstrelsy through bohemianism in white men's hipness" (Ibid.). However, as Monson has noted, "'[m]any white women have enjoyed the reputation of black men and women for hypersexuality'" (Monson as cited in Tucker 2005: 2). Tucker argues that the politics of White jazz appropriation must be theorized to account for "jazz-loving white women" (2005: 2). As a White woman writing on jazz

appropriation, I believe it is worth quoting Tucker at length here as she explains what such a critical unpacking and theorizing would require. She writes:

> we need much more information about white women as minstrel performers and audience members, as bohemians, and as fans of black music. Jayna Brown writes that what white women stood to gain from minstrel performance was "conditional access to realms of expressive freedoms they were otherwise forbidden." Many white women jazz fans would reject any analyses of their devotion to jazz as appropriation, and understandably so. Yet white womanhood has certainly shaped my own pathway of identification as a jazz fan, and jazz seemed to offer what felt like an "escape" from the social position I continue to inhabit, which, of course, has its privileges in a racist culture. Part of my responsibility, then, as a white woman jazz fan is to lose my "innocence" about the pathways of identification I inherit. I may not identify with Miralee's jazz desire, but I need to know its history. (Tucker 2005: 2)

In the available burlesque histories, a discussion about the White women as minstrel performers is lacking because the meanings of musical sounds and movements have not been addressed. The theories and models I use in the following chapters that allow me to address musical meaning and thus discuss White female burlesque performance as minstrelsy include semiotics, performativity, mimesis, and disidentification.

Semiotics has served as a model for interpreting music since 1976 with Jean-Jacques Nattiez's publication of *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*. Susan McClary, in *Feminine Endings* (1991) and Thomas Turino in his article "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music" (1999) also deployed semiotics as a tool to analyze musical meanings. While I find semiotics to be problematically informed by structuralist thought, I deploy the model in tandem with a Geertzian model of "thick description," where the meaning of signs are context-specific and many. What I find useful about semiotics for my second chapter is that it allows me

to discuss how certain musical devices - horn smears, belting or "loud" singing, angular or jerky dancing - regardless of quality or "authenticity," primarily functioned to signal jazz, blackness, and the related connotations to the intended White audience/spectator. These meanings existed in a historical and cultural system of symbols that were chosen by the theatre director, film director, or performer because they would already be interpreted by the audience in particular ways. The re-performance of those devices within the context of the piece, then, served to reinscribe those meanings.

The theory of performativity also underlies much of my work. J.L. Austen, a linguist, first theorized the idea of a "performative" in language. A "performative" was any phrase or word that did not just name or describe something that already existed but actively created a new meaning with its utterance. For instance, the phrase "You are now man and wife" binds two people together into a new social relationship.

In the 1990s, Judith Butler drew from this idea and extended it to include all actions, thereby including all utterances. With the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argued that gender required work; that it, too, was performed and constituted through repetitions of actions, although these repetitions were always slightly different. Thus, Butler would argue that in the phrase "You are now man and wife," the assigning of masculine and feminine genders to the respective parties was also a form of performative work. In 1993, Butler published *Bodies That Matter*, wherein she critiqued the idea of "biological" sex as fixed and focused on how sex is performed as binary.

Along with performativity, I see mimesis as key to reading and interpreting both minstrelsy and burlesque. In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), Taussig argues that we must

begin with the magical, soulful quality that mimesis has been invested with in, for instance, the fetish-objects or figurines of a medicine man which serve as replicas for souls. He elaborates that it is "with the magical power of replication, the image affecting what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in or takes power from the represented" (Taussig 1993: 2) that we see the power of the mimetic faculty. Jayna Brown in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008) discusses how White mimicry of Black dance functioned on this principle of absorption of power. She writes, "To dance the tango, versions of which were developed by slaves in Cuba, was not to desire to be in the slave body. It was to absorb its power, and, through eroticized ritual, affirm its servitude" (Brown 2008: 174). This principle of mimesis, that the representation absorbs power from what it represents, can also be used to re-appropriate or resignify meanings, as contemporary burlesque artists La Chica Boom demonstrates in Chapter Five.

Additionally, I borrow the theory of "disidentification" from Jose Esteban Munoz's book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). Disidentification was developed by French linguist Michel Pecheux. Building on Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's idea that subjects are constructed by ideological practices, Pecheux determined three modes of subject construction: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. In this model, a "Good Subject" chooses to identify with discursive and ideological forms while a "Bad Subject" rejects the dominant ideology's identificatory sites and counteridentifies against these symbolic systems. For Pecheux, "The danger... in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such

a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of 'counterdetermination'" (Ibid.). Pecheux's third mode was disidentification, "a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Ibid.) rather than a strategy of strict assimilation or utter rejection of those ideologies. This strategy of working on and against the dominant ideology is how I frame the performances of critically engaged burlesque performers of color, who work from within burlesque to resignify the dominant ideologies of burlesque. Disidentification and the other theoretical models outlined above provide me with the language and analytical tools to address how and what music means in burlesque performances and ultimately allow me to read some burlesque as minstrelsy.

To begin to unpack the racial and gendered meanings in the music of burlesque, I look first at historical (re)presentations of burlesque performance and music in cultural and social contexts particular to the United States. In Chapter One, I provide a historical overview of burlesque music and performance. Drawing from Richard Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991), Sobel's *Burleycue* (1931) and *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (1956), Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (1993), and Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004), and sheet music from early burlesque shows, I use music as a lens through which burlesque's intersections with minstrelsy come into focus.

In Chapter Two, I build on Sherrie Tucker's work on the racist and colonialist underpinnings of White women's jazz fandom in the film *New Orleans* (1947). I offer my own readings of key scenes from classic era films featuring burlesque music and

performance, arguing that these performances can be read as an extension of blackface minstrelsy. Though the White burlesque performers do not blacken their faces, the music and dance accompanying their performances draw from and exoticize Black musical forms, especially jazz and the blues. Drawing from work on blackface (Mark A. Reid, Katharine Thomas) and the exoticization of Black music (David Butler), I focus my chapter around filmic depictions of burlesque performance, connecting the choices of music and dance to larger discourses on race and gender. Ultimately, I argue that white burlesque performers appropriated conventions of blackface minstrelsy in order to perform gender more subversively than normatively prescribed.

Next, in Chapter Three, I examine the extent to which neo-burlesque could be considered a queering of burlesque by doing close readings of contemporary burlesque performances uploaded to youtube. Here I address two separate yet related and co-informing questions: first, how does contemporary burlesque queer classic burlesque?; and second, is neo-burlesque queer? Following Jose Esteban Munoz, I use gesture to look for queer meaning and queered meanings in three performances: Julie Atlas Muz's "Encore/Sun" performance, Bambi the Mermaid's "Lobster" performance, and Tigger's "Gender Surrender" performance. For me, queer meaning refers to how queerness or incoherencies already inform the norm while queered meanings refer to active subversions of the norm. Each of these artists also serves to exemplify how contemporary burlesque connects to other performance styles that contribute to this queering: performance art, camp, and drag, respectively. I demonstrate the ways in which contemporary burlesque can be read as a queering of burlesque both within the scene and

within each performance and how, alongside this generic queering, neo-burlesque performers and audience members create queer meaning, destabilizing normative assumptions of relations between gender, sexuality, and biological sex and creating spaces for queer bodies and lives.

From here, I look more critically at how this space allows for a more radical performance of gender but does not radically (re)perform or (re)present race. In Chapter Four, I explore how racial and genre boundaries are created and maintained within this new burlesque, resulting in a burlesque normativity. I examine how discourses related to genre work to distinguish burlesque from other performance genres and to privilege certain subgenres of burlesque above others. Racial boundaries are enforced by the narratives of scholarship and performances that reinscribe Whiteness as the privileged site of burlesque history at the expense of people of color.

In Chapter Five, I focus on the critique coming from within contemporary burlesque, highlighting the work being done by burlesque performers of color to interrupt and subvert racist representations of people of color within burlesque. I bring in the work of two solo performers, La Chica Boom and Vaginal Davis, both of whom are actively working within and against the contemporary burlesque scene. The concept of disidentification, as described in Jose Esteban Munoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), serves as a lens to think through the work these performers are doing with/in burlesque. In his introduction, Munoz outlines the theoretical history of the term and acknowledges his own indebtedness to Third World feminists and radical women of color who theorized the term identities-in-difference, a

term which includes disidentificatory identity performances. Identities-in-difference are used to designate emergent identities that arise "...from a failed interpellation with the dominant public sphere" and where "[t]heir emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere" (Munoz 1999: 7). Munoz explains how a disidentifying subject is one who cannot fully identify with an identificatory site - such as a female identity, for instance - because those sites also rely on ideological restrictions. Munoz's theorizing "is meant to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields" (Ibid.: 11).

Disidentification provides a lens through which to discuss the work of people of color in burlesque and in minstrelsy not only in the present day, but also in the early history of these genres. However, it will first be necessary to deconstruct the discursive boundary that has been set between burlesque and minstrelsy in that early history.

CHAPTER ONE

A Burlesque History

In this chapter I focus on burlesque's transformations in cultural and social contexts particular to the United States, using music as a lens to re-evaluate the meanings of burlesque performance in order to show how burlesque, like minstrelsy, has functioned on the historical erasure of Black and Brown bodies. Therefore, my project is historiographical, demonstrating the significance of the overlooked connection between burlesque and minstrelsy. This relationship between burlesque and minstrelsy has been under-emphasized because the scholarship on burlesque does not sufficiently address the musical sounds and movements, elements that constitute the core of burlesque performance. Instead of focusing on the visual and discursive meanings of burlesque, I address how burlesque performers transmit meaning through music and embodiment.

The biases present in the currently available accounts of burlesque's history can make it difficult to construct a more critical history of burlesque that rejects narratives of decline and progress and does not reproduce nostalgia. Robert Allen's book *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991) provides the most complete depiction to date of burlesque's early history in the United States. However, as Susan Glenn implies in her book review, the narrative follows the relatively uncomplicated decline of burlesque comedy (Glenn 1993: 97), which Allen makes explicit by subtitling a section of his last chapter "The Death of Burlesque in New York" (1991: 255). In fact, many of

the available accounts of nineteenth and twentieth century burlesque, regardless of publishing date, follow a similar narrative arc of decline (Sobel 1931, 1956; "The History of Burlesque" 1934; Allen, Ralph G. 2002) and often waxing nostalgic about burlesque of an earlier era. Accounts of contemporary burlesque, on the other hand, often celebrate burlesque's revival as an uncomplicated narrative of progress (Baldwin 2004). Thus, it becomes hard to know which of the "historical facts" the authors have assigned to burlesque's history were chosen because they aligned with their conception of burlesque's narrative trajectory and which facts may have been left out for not fitting into these models. For instance, the majority of the existing accounts of burlesque de-emphasize both the role of minstrelsy in burlesque performance and the contributions of people of color to the genre. In order to reinsert these influences into the narrative of burlesque, burlesque's history must be understood as a series of transformations influenced by and in dialogue with its contemporary forms of entertainment rather than as a story of progress or decline.

Focusing on the persistent importance of performances of gender, sexuality, parody, and inversions of power/social roles in historical accounts of burlesque is one way I interrupt the established narratives of decline or progress. The enduring importance of these devices to burlesque suggests that the genre is constituted by a commonality in approach to performance that has not been getting "better" or "worse" as value-laden accounts of burlesque claim, but that has been differently enacted and expressed at different historical moments. Both burlesque's etymology and earliest recorded history demonstrate a concern with these performance devices. The word *burlesque* comes from

the Italian *burlare*, to make a jest of or to ridicule (Wedgewood 1872: 116), which in turn comes from the Latin *burra*, or trifle (Erich Schwandt, et al 2013). Early on, it was used in reference to plays that burlesqued, or parodied, "serious" topics or theatrical works. Accounts of burlesque's history often credit Greek playwright Aristophanes with bringing burlesque to the stage (Baldwin 2004: 62). His satirical works, such as *Lysistrata* (411 BC) and *The Clouds* (423 BC), represent the earliest known records of a playwright taking topics of the day "and turn[ing] them into farces to make audiences laugh at themselves and the world they live in" (Ibid.: 62). Power, gender, and sexuality were recurring themes in his work. For instance, in his play *Lysistrata*, "the wives of Athenian warriors refuse to have sex with their husbands until they stop the war" (Ibid.). And, in *The Clouds*, "Aristophanes joked that dirty old men in Athens rushed to examine the impressions of genitals and buttocks left behind by good-looking boys sitting in the sand at the gymnasium" (Davis 2010: 41).

Burlesque's long and continuing history in Europe informs and intersects with that of burlesque in America. Due to the context-sensitive meanings of burlesque's impact, historical and cultural changes were reflected in burlesque from the 17th through the 20th century. In the 17th century, as a literary term, burlesque "referred to a grotesque imitation of the dignified or pathetic" (Erich Schwandt, et al 2013). In the early 18th century, burlesque was used to denote musical works that juxtaposed or combined serious and comic elements. For 19th century England, a burlesque was a dramatic production that ridiculed stage conventions. In an American context, from the mid-19th century

onwards, burlesque has referred to "a variety show in which striptease is the chief attraction" (Ibid.).

Early Burlesque: 1866-1870

Most historical accounts date burlesque's introduction to America to the mid-1860s ("The History of Burlesque" 1934; Allen 1991; Baldwin 2004). In a 1934 issue of *The Billboard* magazine, a "Special Burlesque Division" includes a subsection titled "The History of Burlesque," which relates their history of burlesque's beginnings in America:

> Burlesque goes back many years its original association being not with "leg shows" but with travesties. In fact, the accredited definition of burlesque is that it was a name given in the latter 19th Century to a form of musical dramatic composition. These musical burlesques developed from the earlier extravaganzas of J.R. Planche, written frequently around fairy tales. They then split into two parts, one part becoming musical comedy as we know it and the other modern burlesque.
>
> History claims that *The Black Crook*, produced in New York in 1866, marked the birth of modern burlesque. This is the first time in which, as historians put it, "the feminine form divine had been displayed in all its fullness and beauty." This show averaged up to $3,000 a performance, and netted a profit on the season of $650,000. Lydia Thompson and her troupe of British blond burlesquers are claimed to have pioneered modern burlesque, debuting in New York in 1868 at Wood's Museum with the show *Ixion*; or, *The Man at the Wheel*. (1934: 99)

Interestingly, contemporary scholars credit *The Black Crook* as marking the birth of the American Musical, a middle class genre, without mentioning its relation to lowbrow burlesque (Reside 2011), discursively separating the genres along class lines.

In *Horrible Prettiness*, Allen extensively elaborates on British burlesque's introduction to New York in 1868 by Lydia Thompson and her all-female troupe of dancers and actors. He describes how their stage productions featured dance, theatre,

song, and comedy, and were put on by women wearing tights, some of whom dressed and acted as men. Performances featured larger-bodied women smoking, swearing, cross-dressing and talking about women's suffrage, and as Allen argues, presented "a physical and ideological inversion of the Victorian ideal of femininity" (1991: 138). The corseted costumes worn by Thompson and her troupe emphasized their voluptuousness, "calling attention to the markers of sexual difference the sentimental costume kept hidden" (Ibid.).

In the article "Not Just a Leg Show: Gayness and Male Homoeroticism in Burlesque, 1868 to 1877," Michelle Durden likens burlesque to musical comedy, with its rhymed verse, puns, and energetic song-and-dance numbers. Durden locates burlesque's departure from the American Musical in the ways music was scored for the show. She explains that:

> Burlesque differs from the American Musical, a genre it helped create, in that burlesque writers adapted pre-existing popular tunes rather than creating original musical scores. To this music, burlesque actresses sang parodies and performed a variety of dances, including the quadrilles and waltzes that graced society balls, breakdowns borrowed from minstrel shows, and ethnic folk-dances such as polkas, hornpipes and clog dances. For the grand finale, the entire company would often perform the French can-can, titillating audiences with high kicks that revealed the female dancer's legs in tights. (2004)

The first burlesque production in America, *Ixion; or, The Man at the Wheel*, exemplifies these musical and theatrical characteristics. Written by F.C. Burnand in London in 1863, five years prior to its American premiere, *Ixion* is loosely based on the Greco-Roman myths of Ixion and of Ganymede (Durden 2004). And according to Allen, *Ixion* as it was performed in New York was only loosely based on Burnand's *Ixion*. Burnand's text served as the "skeletal structure on which were hung topical allusions,

popular songs, familiar airs to which new lyrics had been composed, dances, and even more outrageous puns" (1991: 12).

Ixion's music grafted new lyrics onto the melodies from contemporary popular songs, parodying the title song of Offenbach's opera bouffe "Barbe Bleue," for example, and the popular song "While Strolling through the Park One Day" (Ibid.). Another song featured in the show was the popular tune "Ringing for Sarah," which the entire cast sang as they rang bells of all sizes (Ibid.). Oliver Ditson & Co. published a sheet music version of this tune titled "Beautiful Bells" in 1870. Dedicated to Lydia Thompson, it includes the subheading "Sung in the Burlesque of *Ixion* and *Field of the Cloth of Gold*."

Figure 1.1: “Beautiful Bells” Sheet Music Cover

The sheet music, written for piano, voice, and four-part chorus, took the form of a waltz, as illustrated by the opening lines:

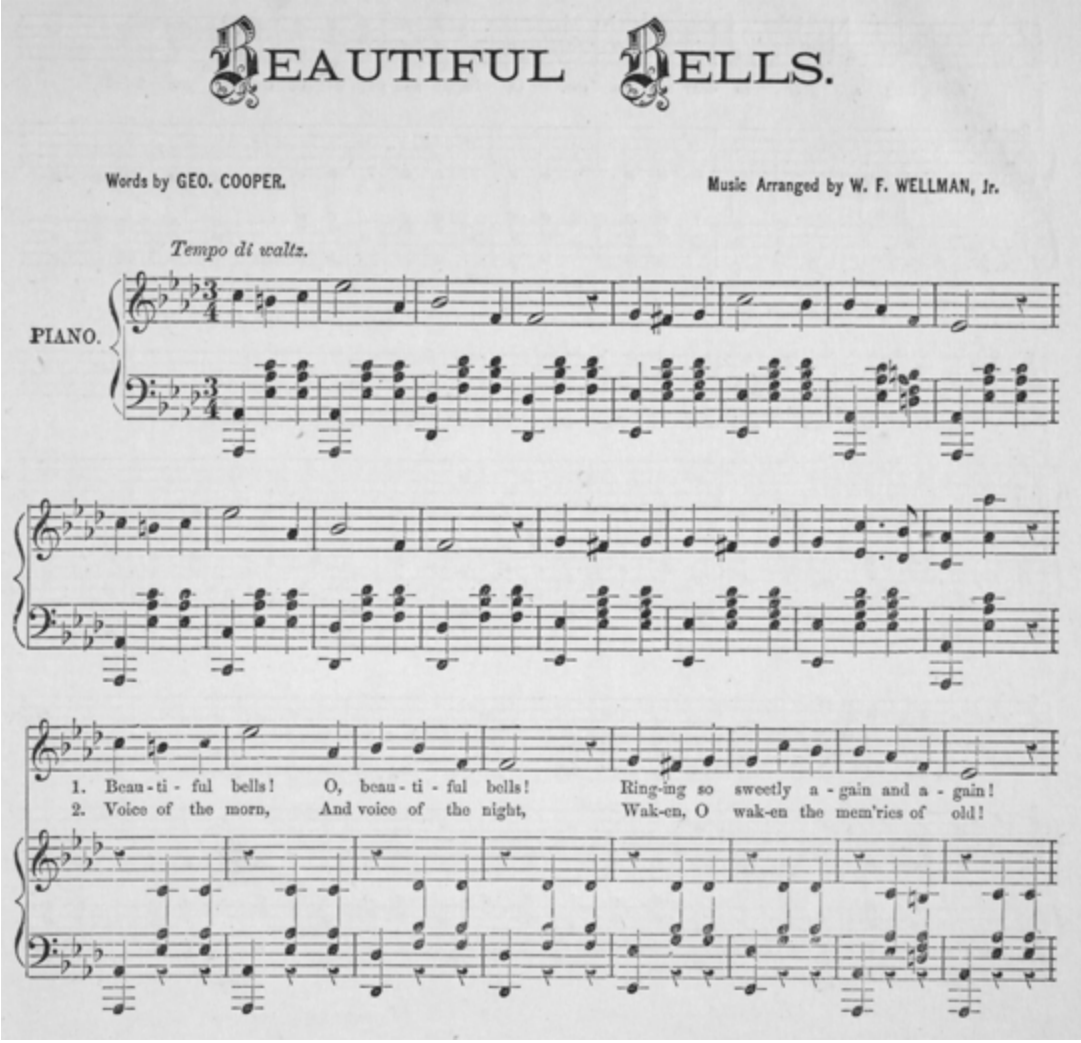

Figure 1.2: “Beautiful Bells” Sheet Music, page 1

Yet while the music seems to maintain an atmosphere of propriety that the waltz would have signaled during this time, its meaning was skewed with its transportation from the parlor to the burlesque stage. Allen notes that while we can only speculate about the exact staging of *Ixion*, carte-de-visite photographs depict Thompson in costume as Ixion wearing a stylized Greek tunic, flesh-colored tights and ankle length boots - a costume that was “different in style but no more revealing than those worn by ballet

dancers of the period" (1991: 13). While Thompson's costume may have been no more revealing than those of contemporary ballet dancers, her costume was intended to mark her as a man in the context of the performance, a gendered role that would not have been allowed her in the Victorian parlor or society dances. What's more, the pastiche of genres surrounding this waltz in Ixion would have situated the waltz in a parodic sonic world. As Allen notes, "In addition to the cancan, the show contained jigs, hornpipes, and parodies of minstrel show numbers" (Ibid.). Finally, the presence of sexual double entendres throughout the performance would have further subverted the sense of propriety a waltz normally would have assumed.

Shortly after *Ixion*'s New York premiere, Thompsonian burlesque's popularity inspired the formation of other burlesque troupes. These newly-formed troupes put their own spin on burlesque and fused it with contemporary American popular traditions.

Burlesque and Minstrelsy: 1870-1890

Burlesque as a popular cultural form emerged in dialogue with its contemporaries: vaudeville, variety shows, and minstrel shows. In fact, Allen indicates that "burlesque assumed the three-part structure of the minstrel show in the 1870s, which it kept until the turn of the century" (1991:30). Ralph Allen, who wrote the Broadway burlesque musical *Sugar Babies*, describes this change in show format:

> The man who combined the atmosphere of the honky-tonk with the patterns of the minstrel show was Michael Leavitt, the Ziegfeld of the tenderloin, who began a long and profitable career as a producer well before 1870, when he borrowed without much alteration the stock format used by the minstrel impresario E. P. Christy: a three-part performance consisting of banter between the white interlocutor and black face comedians; an olio of variety acts; and an afterpiece or concluding farce.

> Leavitt's principal innovation was the substitution of attractive women for the black-faced “end men” or clowns. (2002: 52)

Yet it was not just the structure of minstrel shows that influenced burlesque. The content of the minstrel show also significantly contributed to the burlesque show, although this influence and its implications have been downplayed in most historical accounts. The replacement of black-faced “clowns” with White women is significant, and I would argue that this substitution was not always, if ever, complete. Allen clarifies that while the third part of the performance, the burlesque sketch comedy or travesty, “always relied on familiar blackface dialect humor... As far as can be determined, “female” minstrels always appeared as white characters, sometimes adorned with blonde wigs” (1991: 165). So while they did not don blackface, the women were still filling the same role as the minstrel, certainly in a structural sense and sometimes in a more literal, performative sense. The 1934 issue of *The Billboard* magazine previously mentioned alludes to this more explicit connection to minstrelsy:

> The daddy of American burlesque is purported to have been M.B. (Mike) Leavitt, who, in 1870, introduced an organization comprising minstrelsy, vaudeville, and burlesque. This was Madame Rentz’s Female Minstrels, also known as the Rentz-Santley troupe... It was thru this show that the public’s taste was directed to the natural wit and humor contained in many travesties. (“The History of Burlesque” 1934: 99)

In *Horrible Prettiness*, regarding these female minstrel shows, Allen asks:

> How are we to account for what seems on the surface to be a curious hybridization of two such disparate forms of popular entertainment? The minstrel show was an all-male form; burlesque, obviously, was dominated by female performers. The minstrel show worked by playing with and playing up racial differences between white audience members and the caricatured blacks impersonated by white performers onstage; burlesque had little of this ethnic or racial basis to its humor. (1991: 165)

To begin to unpack this question, Allen cites Robert Toll, author of *Blacking Up*, who attributes this "curious hybridization" primarily to economic concerns. For Toll, minstrelsy needed to compete with "the explosive growth of feminine spectacle that occurred in the wake of *The Black Crook*" (Ibid.: 166), which also attracted a working and lower middle class audience. In an entrepreneurial attempt to recapture some of their waning audience, they replaced "white male minstrels in blackface with white female burlesque performers" (Ibid.). However, the addition of burlesque performers did not fit with minstrelsy's family orientation, and Toll argues that as a result, the minstrel show audience did not increase and they created a new genre, burlesque, which actually drew away from some of minstrelsy's male audience.

Yet as Allen points out, minstrelsy and burlesque had been informing each other at least since 1836, when minstrel shows were popularized in Britain, "a popularity that fed easily into the burlesque and extravaganza traditions" (Ibid.: 169). So, even before Thompsonian burlesque made its way to America it had already incorporated elements of the minstrel show. For instance, the 1870 Thompsonian production *Robinson Crusoe* included a march with twenty-four female warriors and "six negro minstrels, who sing "De King Am Coming," accompanying themselves first on the banjo, then the bones, then do a wooden shoe dance" (Ibid.). This configuration seems to have directly borrowed from the minstrel show, which Eric Lott describes as "four or five or sometimes more white male performers... made up with facial blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork and adorned in outrageously oversize and/or ragged "Negro" costumes. Armed

with an array of instruments, usually banjo, fiddle, bone castanets, and tambourine, the performers would stage a tripartite show" (Lott 1993: 5). The following picture of Lydia Thompson as Robinson Crusoe and Willie Edouin in blackface as Friday was used as advertising for the production and captures this often de-emphasized, simplified link between burlesque and blackface:[1]

[1] Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind* (2004) features a similar photograph of Lydia Thompson and Willie Edouin in blackface, 2, but makes no explicit mention of minstrelsy or blackface in relation to Thompsonian burlesque. Her caption reads "Lydia Thompson shown here posed in a promotional shot dressed as Robinson Crusoe with her man Friday in tow." 3. Similarly, the notes for this particular image in The Global Performing Arts Database point out Lydia Thompson's white stockings rather than Edouin's blackface.

Figure 1.3: Lydia Thompson as Robinson Crusoe and Willie Edouin in blackface

Allen enumerates some of the deep structural and functional similarities between burlesque and minstrelsy:

> Both forms worked upon principles of transgression and inversion. Both were constructed around ironic, low-other characters, whose speech, costume, behavior, and demeanor helped to structure different but homologous ideological problematics: gender and race, respectively. As low-other constructions, both the burlesque performer and the blackface minstrel were subject to simultaneous contrary interpretations by their audiences.
>
> The sexual objectification of the burlesque performer confirmed the authority of the male spectator to visually possess her, while, at the same time, her inversive and transgressive performance pointed to the social and sexual system within which both spectator and performer were situated. Similarly, the black man represented by the blackface minstrel was obviously an object of ridicule, a construction of thoroughgoing otherness that allowed white audiences to see themselves as both ontologically different and constitutionally superior. (1991: 169-170)

Allen concludes that both economics and this underlying structural logic contributed to the hybridization of burlesque and the minstrel show in the early 1870s. For Allen, one consequence of this hybridization "was to direct the course of burlesque's development as an autonomous popular entertainment form downward toward the minstrel show's working-class audience and away from mainstream bourgeois theaters and audiences" (Ibid.: 177). While Allen points to structural similarities here, he still works to separate the genres into discrete categories: burlesque concerned itself with gender, while minstrelsy concerned itself with race.

However, as Lott points out, minstrelsy was also very much about gender and sexuality. Lott argues that to some extent, minstrelsy was predicated on the homoerotic desire white men felt for black men's bodies that drove them "To put on the cultural

forms of "blackness"... to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry" (Lott: 1993: 52). He writes that this homoerotic desire tied to a fear of miscegenation was evident in the ways minstrelsy traded in both "a jealous guarding of the prized white female body and a fascination with black male sexual potency that either precedes or follows it" (Ibid.: 57) and contribute to what he calls the "twitchy love" in the title *Love and Theft*. Ultimately, "It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure" (Ibid.: 6). This sexual fear and desire manifested in minstrelsy's origin stories, which often featured accounts of the disembodied voices of black men singing. In one such account, the author imagined "the hum of the plantation":

> [N]ow, anew, I hear the sound of those manly negro voices swelling up upon the evening gale. Nearer and nearer comes the boat, higher and higher rises the melody, till it overpowers and subdues the noise of the oars, which in their turn become subservient to the song, and mark its time with harmonious beating. ("Negro Minstrelsy - Ancient and Modern" 76-77 as cited in Lott 1993: 58)

As Lott points out, these accounts represent the black male voice as powerful and sexual, but require that black men "remain voices, without presence, imaginative projections" (Lott: 1993: 58).

Locating "black"-ness in the white female bodies of burlesque performers could have been a way to sublimate the white male audience's panicky homoerotic desire for black male bodies into an appropriate sexual object. Though the female burlesque performers did not blacken their faces, some of the lyrics they sang around the turn of the

twentieth century, which I will examine below, can be read as performances of minstrelsy or ethnic drag. As female burlesque performers transitioned to silent roles on stage, their costuming, musical accompaniment, and embodied dance continued to draw from Black culture or the cultures of "exotic" Others.

Vaudeville's Exotic Low Other: 1890-1910

Critics also contributed to burlesque's displacement from mainstream theaters. While initially the form was favorably received by a bourgeois audience, as it gained in popularity and moved into more mainstream venues critics began to write negative reviews, characterizing it as a "leg business" and "a cultural epidemic of indecency, impudence, and suggestive sexual display that, far from rescuing the theatre from tameness, poisoned it and all society with it" (Allen, 1991: 16). By the 1890s burlesque had been successfully marginalized socially and culturally, and was cast by the press primarily as low brow, working-class entertainment for men.

A discussion of burlesque's divergence from vaudeville merits some discussion here. While *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* describes burlesque as "an offshoot of vaudeville" (Slide, 1994: 72) - and indeed burlesque shows often featured comics and a variety show element in addition to female dance numbers - by the early 1900s burlesque was positioned as vaudeville's lower class, risque counterpart for an all-male audience. In *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville*, Bernard Sobel writes how, "At the turn of the century, variety acts, generally known as vaudeville, were given a variety of appellations - "continuous," "advanced," "electric," "polite," "refined," "fashionable," and "legitimate," to mention a few - many of them stemming from a concerted effort to make it a family

entertainment" (1961: 24). Sobel elaborates on this "evolution from bawdy shows to cleaner ones" (Ibid.: 40), which corresponded with higher quality programs, higher salaries for the performers, and the construction of new theatres so that by 1910 there were around 2000 small-time theatres and "vaudeville represented a facet of middle-class American life, along with fraternal lodges, baseball games, socials and picnics" (Ibid.: 49). So, as burlesque started catering to an all-male working-class audience and featured increasingly overt displays of female sexuality, vaudeville began seeking a middle-class audience of all ages and genders by framing their shows as "refined" and "legitimate".

Changes in form and representations of femininity accompanied this change in audience and setting. As Allen summarizes:

> The takeoffs on venerated objects of high culture and punning rhymed couplets spoken by cross-dressed women were gradually eliminated as burlesque increasingly became centered around feminine sexual display - in the cooch dance in the 1890s; in its jazzed-up successor, the shimmy, in the 1910s; and in the striptease of the late 1920s and 1930s. (1991: 30)

Burlesque also began to rely more explicitly on exoticization and Orientalism, especially after the 1893 Chicago World's Fair which introduced the "cooch" dance to American audiences. Dancers at the fair exposed their navels and performed the "hootchy-kootchy," gyrating their hips with movements based on belly dancing and notably increasing attendance and profits at the fair. Michelle Baldwin explains that while fair attendance had tapered off after the first few days, "attendance picked up as word spread about the exotic dancing exhibit. The great crowds the dancers brought in were credited by some for having saved the fair" (2004: 3). The dancer who attracted the

most attention called herself Little Egypt and "claimed to be a native of Armenia whose birth name was Fahreda Mahzar Spyropolis, though both her name and birthplace were likely much less exotic" (Ibid.). Baldwin describes the audience's reaction as "fascinated and aroused by the quake of Little Egypt's hips and stomach" (Ibid.). Burlesque dancers also engaged in this uncritical exoticization and sexualization of dances they associated with the Middle East, and rapidly incorporated the "hootchy-kootchy," or the "cooch" into their performances.

While the historical origins of the word "hootchy cootchy" are uncertain, its use in sheet music of the latter half of the nineteenth century connects it to minstrelsy. According to Charles Kennedy in his article "When Cairo Met Main Street," the term was first used in the 1863 minstrel show song "The Ham Fat Man," appearing there as "hoochee koochee koochee" (Kennedy 1998: 278):

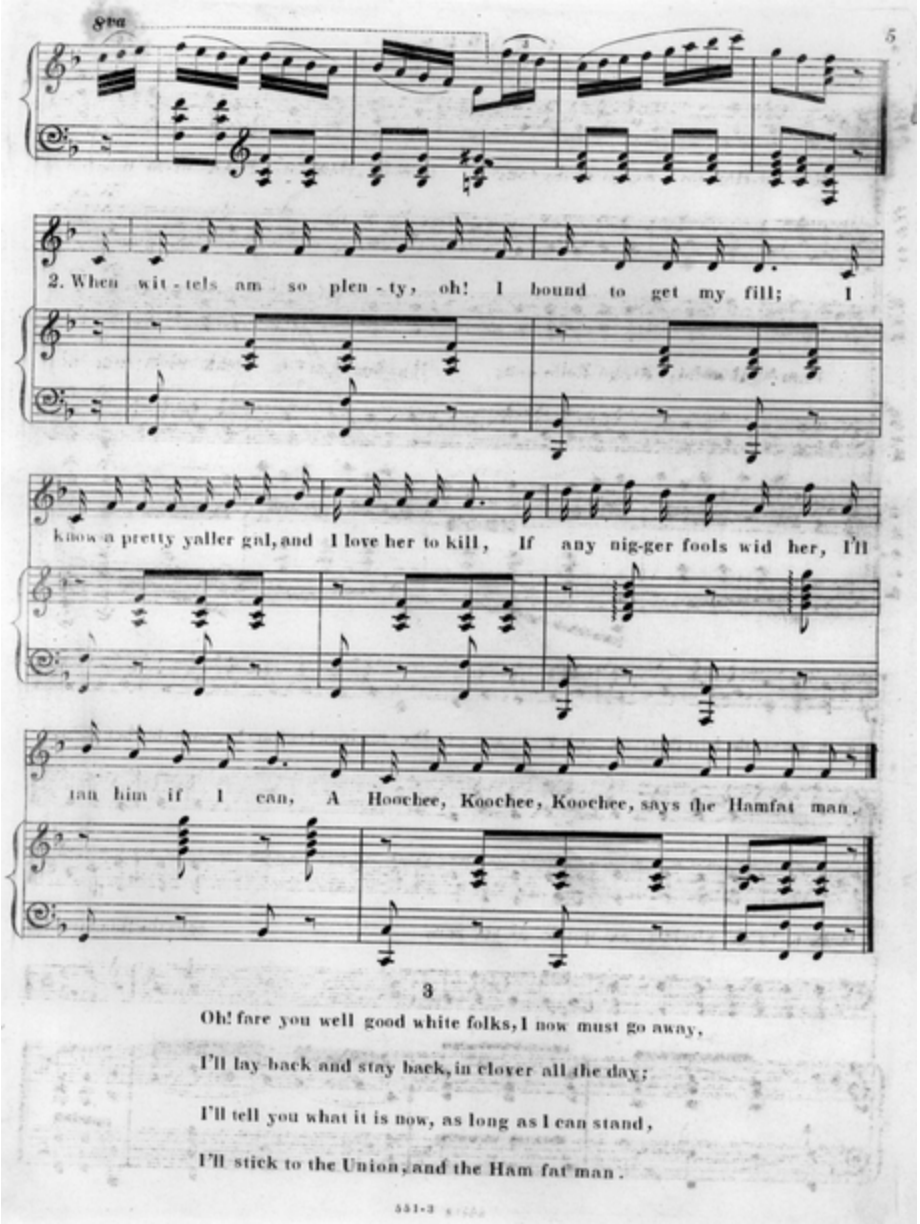

Figure 1.4: "The Ham Fat Man" Sheet Music, page 3

While any precise meaning of "hoochee koochee koochee" is unclear here, the "black" dialect present in the surrounding lyrics suggests that this may be another such

dialecticism. The lyrics of the chorus, for instance, feature other rhyming words with no clear meanings today:

Ham fat, ham fat, zigga zolla zan,
Ham fat, ham fat, Tickle olla tan;
oh! Walk into de kitchen, as fast as you can,
Hoochee Koochee Koochee, says the Hamfat Man

Here, these rhymed phrases seem to function as expressions of pleasure, so when "Hoochee Koochee Koochee" appears in the second verse, above, after a description of the "black" character's relationship with a "pretty yaller gal," it may serve again as an expression of pleasure, this time of a sexual nature. What's more, this final expression of sexual pleasure makes a yellow, presumably "oriental," woman the object of that pleasure. This relationship between an "oriental" woman and a Black man would later reappear on the burlesque stage, while still retaining the conventions of minstrelsy.

The music of Weber and Field's 1901 burlesque show "Hoity Toity" demonstrates how burlesque explicitly relied on and performed minstrelsy and orientalism. Both of the songs Fay Templeton performed in this show, "My Japanese Cherry Blossom" and "Mary Black," required Templeton, a White woman, to perform an ethnicity that was not her own in a stereotypical manner. In the song "My Japanese Cherry Blossom," lyrics by Edgar Smith and music by John Stromberg, Templeton sang with a stereotyped Japanese immigrant dialect that was transcribed into the lyrics, as the first verse and chorus demonstrates:

I have what you call-ee "sweat-heart,"
he's Unite' States man,
Big moustache like this
It all-ee sam-ee nic-ee,

Little Cho Cho San;
Tickle when he kiss,
The first-ee time I meet-ee him
he wink this way
And ‘fore I know he near,
He sitt-ee down beside me
and I hear him say
All these nice words in my ear:

Chorus:
“I love you my Jap’nese cherry blossom,
Your lips are sweeter than pone and possum,
Nestle close against your ragtime ‘Mel’-can man.
You can’t shake me my Cho Cho San.”

Here, the dialect chosen for Cho Cho San relies on stereotypes of Japanese immigrants’ pronunciation and grammar of English, such as the replacement of “r” with “l” in ‘Mel’-can man, the “ee” added to the ends of words, and the dropping of articles and consonants as in “he’s Unite’ States man” - ostensibly for comedic effect. The music confirms the intended comedic reception of the song, using note length to demonstrate the length of the mustache, for instance:

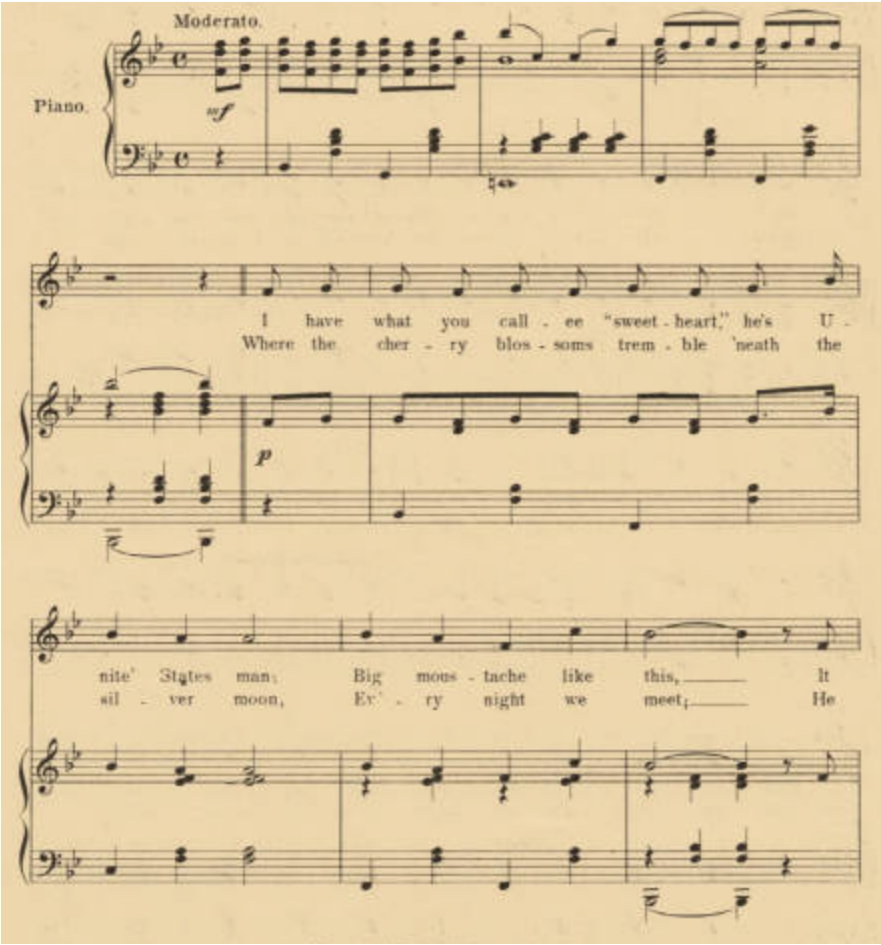

Figure 1.5: "My Japanese Cherry Blossom" Sheet Music, page 1

The musical accompaniment, too, seeks to establish "Asian"-ness through its initial pentatonicism, while the simple vocal line, syllabic and narrow in range, contributes with the lyrics to reduce the female character to a simple, two-dimensional "Japanese woman" character who happily sings of her own sexualization and objectification. This self-sexualization and objectification becomes especially apparent in the second verse, where she sings mostly of how her "sweetheart" objectifies her and the narrative focus remains on his actions and his voice:

Where the cherry blossoms tremble
'neath the silver moon,
ev'ry night we meet;
He sing-ee me a song-ee
lik-ee 'Mel'-can coon,
Call me: "honey sweet."
He say: "I am a cuckoo
and a beauty bright"
I don't know if it wrong,
But I know that I could listen
to him all night,
When he sing-ee me this song:
(Chorus)

The lyrics here confirm that Cho Cho San's "sweetheart" is a Black man, referring to him as a "'Mel'-can coon" where once before, and then again with the chorus's repetition, his blackness had been implied in the phrase a "ragtime 'Mel'-can man," and with the chorus's music, where "over ragtime piano figuration, the voice switches... and the vocabulary mimics the minstrel song" (Hamberlin 2011: 153). Thus, the storyline here essentially re-presents the storyline of the second verse of the "The Ham Fat Man," featuring a romantic relationship between a Black man and an "oriental" woman, this time told from the perspective of the Japanese woman. As in minstrelsy's origin stories, the voice of the Black man is presented as sexually seductive and successful, and here, too, he remains only a voice, filtered through a white woman pretending to be a Japanese woman - and thus eliminating the need to find a Japanese woman who would agree to take on such a demeaning role. Capitalizing on stereotypes of both Japanese women and Black men as hypersexual, these songs perpetuated those myths by presenting them on the stage and singing them in the first person, performing an acoustic minstrelsy.

The song "Mary Black," also featured in Weber and Field's burlesque "Hoity Toity" and sung by Fay Templeton, uses some of the same conventions as "My Japanese Cherry Blossom" and can also be read as minstrelsy. The lyrics, for instance, similarly attempt to signal Blackness through the use of dialect:

Verse 1:
Talk about your Mary Green
Mary White and Mary Brown
De gal dat makes 'em all look mean
lives right yere in dis town
Ebry back has got ter ben'
And hearts am on de rack
For de lady of color
Whose cognomen is Mary Black

Chorus:
Mary Black,
when yo' gwine to take me back
You know, I love you so,
Why did yo' gib me de sack?
Mary Green
You can chase right off the scene
An' eb'ry other colored gal
clars de track for Mary Black.

Verse 2:
Mary used to feed me ham,
Til one sorry day I said
If Mary had a little lamb,
I'd be much better fed.
I got lammed good and plenty den,
And out I went kersmack
'Sisted by the lady
Whose cognomen is Mary Black

While the song is about a Black woman, the heterosexual imperative would imply that Templeton is actually performing the role of a Black man here, enacting gender and ethnic drag through the lyrics. So, while White burlesque performers in the early

twentieth century may not have been putting on blackface for their performances, they certainly were imitating people of other ethnicities in their songs in a manner akin to that of minstrelsy.

As early as 1896, Black theatre productions began to critique this institutionalized racism and exoticism on the stage. John W. Isham's musical *Oriental America*, which ran from 1896 to 1899, the first Black musical to open on a "legitimate" Broadway stage rather than in burlesque or vaudeville houses, departed from both the minstrel show format and representations (Peterson 2001: 138). For instance, rather than ending with a dance finale as would be typical in minstrelsy, Isham chose to end the show with a concert and operatic finale "consisting of solos, duets, and choral selections" (Ibid.). Furthermore, women of color, including Ada Overton Walker, Stella Wiley, Dora Deane, and Belle Davis, starred in the show, described by contemporary burlesque performer Chicava HoneyChild as "a dazzling spectacle mocking the exotification of African-American and Asian women, illustrating the hypocrisy of America's policies in the Far East, and the enforcement of Jim Crow laws stateside" (HoneyChild 2012). The existence of productions such as this demonstrate both that there was a contemporary discourse critiquing the exoticization of Black and Asian bodies and that there were other ways and other stages on which burlesque artists of this era could have chosen to perform.

1910-1930

While striptease is usually of central importance to contemporary burlesque, it was not until the 1920s that striptease became institutionalized in burlesque. In a rather problematic and very nostalgically tinged account of burlesque written by Sobel in 1956,

performers Ann Corio and Gypsy Rose Lee are credited with popularizing striptease in burlesque. Sobel describes how "the art of undressing became a ceremony with a special technique and nomenclature. The number itself was a combination of posing, strutting, dancing and singing punctuated from time to time by thrusts and twists of the abdomen called 'bumps' and 'grinds'" (1956: 127). Michelle Baldwin explains that while there are many stories surrounding "the" inventor of modern striptease, most of the stories mention Mae Dix:

> …a woman working for the Minsky brothers' burlesque in 1917. Mae Dix danced in a dress with removable cuffs and collar, and as she left the stage one night she took off the collar, hoping to keep it clean enough to last through a few more performances. The audience went wild, so she headed back out onstage and removed the cuffs. Then, as Morton Minsky remembers it, 'Mae lost her head, went back for a short chorus and unbuttoned her bodice.' (2004: 8)

Baldwin asserts that, "By the late 1920s, burlesque was synonymous with striptease... Strippers were the main feature in burlesque, and the rest of the program - the comics, the variety acts - was there to fill out the show" (Ibid.: 9).

1930-1960

By the 1930s, burlesque performers began to incorporate more elaborate costumes and props as "promoters realized that the only way to keep the audiences coming in, once the novelty of nudity wore off, was to hire the women with the best props, techniques, and style" (Ibid.). Gypsy Rose Lee was one of the most well-known striptease artists of this era, and in the Broadway adaptation of her biography, *Gypsy*, three older burlesque performers refer to this imperative with their directive "You've got to get a gimmick, if you want to get ahead" (Ibid.: 10). Lee's gimmick was her upper-class manners and

speaking style with which she broke the fourth wall during her performances, wittily conversing with the audience as she removed her clothing. Other creative gimmicks and props included: a parrot, which Yvette Dare trained to fly on and off the stage and remove her clothing; a bathtub, used by, among many others, Lily St. Cyr in a boudoir scene, Tirza in her Bacchanalian wine bath routine, and Dorothy Henry, who filled her bathtub with milk; and tassel twirling (Ibid.). Baldwin elaborates on tassel twirling's introduction to burlesque:

> Carrie Finnell, famous for dragging out a strip for weeks, returned to burlesque in her forties with a new act. Finnell had an "educated bosom" that she had trained to pop out of her dress and dance using pure muscle control to launch her hefty breasts right, left, up, down, and, when she attached a pair of tassels, around and around. Thus, the novelty of tassel twirling became popular and other teasers such as Sally Keith, Rosa Mack (a.k.a. Baby Dumpling), and Bambi Lane took it up as well, though no one had the muscular ability that Finnell boasted. (Ibid.: 10-11)

The Great Depression actually boosted burlesque's popularity, as previous patrons of more expensive and "high" cultural forms of entertainment found themselves no longer able to afford the ticket prices. Minsky's chain of New York burlesque houses did well enough to move on to Broadway, taking over a Times Square theater district venue. While burlesque had previously managed to evade the harshest censorship by staying under the radar, this move to Broadway along with producers' push to make shows more risque contributed to NYC city officials sending out "warnings that burlesque needed to tame it down" (Ibid.: 12). These warnings were largely ignored. In response, "Mayor La Guardia cracked down on producers and performers, and by 1937, theatrical burlesque

was all but dead in New York. The word *burlesque* was outlawed as was the use of the Minsky name to advertise any product" (Ibid.).

Filmic depictions of burlesque from this period indicate that the music often relied on conventions of jazz and the blues, music that was coded both lower class and black and that performers claimed inspired more "authentic," i.e. uninhibited and involuntary, responses in the body than upper class "classical" music. Jazz- and blues- influenced sounds, such as brass-heavy instrumentation, horn smears, and, when there was singing, belting, feature prominently in these films, which I will look more closely at in the next chapter.

Convinced that burlesque was finished forever, never to attain its prior glory now that dress designers had "declared that skirts should be shorter, [and] legs ceased to be a rarity" (1956: 187), Sobel ends his *Pictorial History of Burlesque* with a chapter titled "Decline and Fall," concluding "thus died burlesque" (Ibid.: 190).

1960-1990

From the 1960s through the late 1980s/early 1990s, there is a considerable gap in the history of burlesque. Accounting for this gap, Michelle Baldwin begins the first chapter of her book with another statement announcing burlesque's death:

> When Ann Corio, a former burlesque queen of the 1920s and 1930s, called her 1960s review "This Was Burlesque," she was publicly declaring what the masses already knew was true: burlesque was dead. It had lost the charm and comedy of its early days and had devolved into rough and artless nudie shows, the predecessor to the modern strip club. (2004: 1)

At a burlesque dance class I attended, the instructor provided a similar history as we practiced beginner moves to a song from this era. She noted that no one talks about this

period of burlesque because burlesque moved into strip clubs. And, in nearly every account of burlesque, there is a rhetorical distancing of burlesque from this period of its history (Allen 1991; Baldwin 2004).

Baldwin locates go-go clubs of the 1960s - where multiple women danced on multiple stages or in cages, dancing suggestively without stripping - as the forerunners of modern strip club dancing. She explains how gentlemen's clubs expanded the cast of a show from eight performers, as was typical in burlesque, to thirty-five performers. Attributing the "loosening" of morals and tastes at these clubs to a similar "loosening" of social morals in the late 1960s through the 1970s, Baldwin quotes Satan's Angel, famous for igniting her twirling tassels, who "stuck it out into the early 1980s" (2004: 14). According to Satan's Angel, "'It just got to the point that they didn't want a clean act, and the nastier you were, the better they liked it'" (Ibid.). For Baldwin, "There was no tease left in modern stripping", a position which can account for some of this rhetorical distancing as Baldwin later affirms, "Burlesque is all about the tease and what you don't show rather than what you do" (Ibid.: 14; 123).

1990-Present: Neo-burlesque

Neo-burlesque, or the new burlesque, is a revival movement that began to gain traction in the mid-90s/early 2000s (Tremmel 2011). This burlesque revival, as described by the documentary *Exotic World and the Burlesque Revival* and by Kate Valentine, came from a place of nostalgia for burlesque performance of the 1950s and offered a feminist space in which to perform. Despite the "neo" sometimes attached to burlesque and the scene's ties to drag and performance art, most contemporary burlesque

performers are not interested in completely re-inventing the burlesque wheel. Many artists draw inspiration from classic-era burlesque or nod to favorite artists during a performance by incorporating classic-era costumes, moves, or even re-creating routines as tributes. Their routines often incorporate humor, camp, drag, theatre, striptease, and performance art, and usually end with the reveal, or the "punch line" of their mostly unclothed body. Differently bodied, gendered, sexed, and desiring performers participate in the scene, although the majority of performers and audience members are white and middle-class. Performers typically range in age from mid-20s to mid-30s, although some older performers are able to remain actively involved with the Burlesque Hall of Fame and by performing in "legend's night" events (Astrid 2011).

The neo-burlesque movement has inspired several recent documentary-style films, including 2010's *Dirty Martini*, which focuses on NYC-based neo-burlesque performer Dirty Martini and the NYC neo-burlesque scene. This film features interviews with Dirty and with other notable NYC neo-burlesque performers such as Julie Atlas Muz and Tigger, as well as short clips of their performances. A performance by Bambi the Mermaid that is highlighted in this film exemplifies this more performance-art based NYC scene. Initially dressed as a lobster, Bambi performs to Billie Holiday's "All of Me." While crying, she slowly removes her false claws and lobster tail, until she is down to pasties, at which point she douses herself in butter, smiles, and runs off the stage.

Whereas earlier eras of burlesque primarily performed to live music, most contemporary performers choose to perform to musical recordings for reasons of expense and consistency (Baldwin 2004: 109). Theoretically, this transition to recorded sound

would allow performers to create acts around songs from any genre and any post-recorded-sound era. However, using "modern" music remains an area of contest for fans and performers, some of whom "are adamantly against using anything written after the 1960s" (Ibid.: 112). While some performers do choose songs from across the generic spectrum, with song choices ranging from a female vocalist's rendition of "God Bless the U.S.A." to the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K." to Liszt's "Hungarian Fantasy," jazz from the 1930s through the 1950s remains the most popular choice.

The live bands that do play exclusively for burlesque performances exemplify this continued centrality of jazz to burlesque. For instance, the Shim Sham Revue, a now-closed New Orleans venue, housed Ronnie Magri and his New Orleans Jazz Band. This group "covered the great tunes of the golden burlesque age and knocked out the 1940s and 1950s bump-and-grind beat for teasers at the club" (Ibid.: 110). Another live burlesque band is the San Francisco Famous Burlesque Orchestra, founded by Brian "Fisherman" Lease in 1997 and currently led by Paul Bergmann. This burlesque orchestra plays "a variety of classic striptease tunes, grindcore, show tunes, and jazz" (Ibid.: 109). Even John Bates, leader of the psychobilly band Big John Bates, which plays punk/retro rockabilly to back up the burlesque duo the Voodoo Dollz, points to the importance of jazz-derived sounds. Commenting on the importance of live music to burlesque, he asserts, "There's nothing like a really mean horn to put an edge on things" (Ibid.: 113).

In the next chapter, by looking at filmic representations of burlesque and its music from the 1930s and 40s, I will examine how and why jazz - which for White audiences sonically indexed “black”-ness, sex, and modernity - became so central to burlesque.

CHAPTER TWO

Filmic Representations of Classic Era Burlesque Music

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the history of burlesque connects to that of minstrelsy. These performance traditions toured the same circuits, and in the variety show context were often presented side-by-side, different acts that contributed to the making of the same show.[2] By focusing on the music, particularly on the use and fetishization of jazz and Black musical forms, I read burlesque as a performance of female minstrelsy. In this chapter, I will be building on Sherrie Tucker's work on the racist and colonialist underpinnings of White women's jazz fandom in the film *New Orleans* (1947) by looking at burlesque films of this era that produce a similar racial and cultural politics. Katharine Thomas, in her dissertation *Hollywood blackface and its descendents* [sic]*: Negotiating race and difference through performances of the other in Hollywood musicals*, describes how blackface functioned in Hollywood musicals to reify Whiteness:

> While the vast majority of scenes [in Hollywood musicals] defined what whiteness was, these [blackface] scenes defined what whiteness wasn't - black, gaudy, impoverished, prone to loud singing and angular dancing, etc. These markers could be donned at will, but were always shed before

[2] In fact, the film *Coney Island*, discussed below, serves as an example of these side by side performances of blackface and burlesque and illustrates how these performances were used to constitute whiteness. Early in the film, Kate's burlesque performances reference "black"-ness to position Kate in opposition to and as failing to perform the Victorian ideals of white femininity. After Kate and the nightclub have graduated from burlesque performance to the staging of middle class musical revues, a blackface number serves to affirm Kate's now more conventional and socially sanctioned performance of White womanhood by defining her Whiteness against the "not-whiteness," i.e. "black"-ness, of the performers in blackface.

> the final curtain, proving that they were ultimately incompatible with whiteness. (Thomas, 2008: xii)

Though the burlesque performers in the films I look at do not blacken their faces, filmic depictions of burlesque often feature jazz and rely on the same racist and colonialist discourses that linked jazz to "black"-ness, sex, and modernity for a White consuming public.

My methodology will rely heavily on close readings of key burlesque scenes in films that feature or reference classic-era burlesque in order to show how the music, dialogue, and images interact, contextualizing burlesque musically and socially. The films I have chosen to bring in to my analyses are: *Lady of Burlesque* (1943), *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), *Gilda* (1946), *Stage Door Canteen* (1943), *Applause* (1929), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *Coney Island* (1943). In these films, "black"-ness is signalled by and "hidden" in the music and embodied performance; it is masked by the White body performing on stage.

I will also be drawing on the literature on musical topics and stereotype in film music. From the burlesque scenes in these films, I have determined two burlesque musical topics - one based on conventions of "jazz" and one on conventions of "classical" music. The primary burlesque topic, characterized by the use of "jazz" features brass instruments, horn smears, and belting. These musical devices seek to highlight and enact burlesque's low-brow aesthetics and its rejection of White middle and upper class normativity by performing "black"-ness. These jazz-influenced sounds often occur in relation to a secondary topic which serves as a musical, social, and racial foil.

Featuring high strings and/or woodwinds this topic is comparatively constrained in relation to the primary topic, either stylistically (through the use of "classical" music) and/or temporally (through the use of a musical vamp). The interaction of these two musical topics ultimately serves to create a new set of scripts for normative burlesque behavior where White bodies perform a sonic and embodied "black"-ness.

I do not intend to make any claims about "authentic" versus "diluted" jazz, but I do want to suggest that certain musical devices - horn smears, belting or "loud" singing, angular or jerky dancing - regardless of quality or "authenticity," primarily functioned to signal jazz, "black"-ness, modernity, and sex to the intended White audience/spectator. For instance, in *Jazz Noir*, David Butler describes the jazz in *They Live by Night* (1948), which *is* played by a Black band, as "an extremely diluted form of jazz - music that is merely suggestive of jazz, but does enough for the audience to associate it with that idiom and the connotations related to it" (2002: 3). Butler later elaborates on the meanings jazz evoked, citing *The Land of Jazz* (1920), where "Jazz is presented as music founded on impulse and devoid of reason, an interpretation of jazz that Hollywood would maintain for years" (Ibid.: 38), and connected to "such themes as voodoo and primitivism" (Ibid.:39). The associated dancing fulfills the function of imaginary 'black'-ness as well. Butler explains how, "The bodily abandon of the jazz dance in *The Land of Jazz* reflects the Eurocentric misunderstanding of the function of rhythm as being expressive of sex and cultural primitivism" (Ibid.). For Butler, these polarizing, racially-coded representations of jazz are connected to the problem of mind/body dualism, one dualism among many that "have flourished in Hollywood films" (Ibid.: 29). He comments further

that “The implications of this dualism... go far beyond jazz and film and have affected the construction of notions of whiteness and non-whiteness that privilege the former while encouraging the oppression and denigration of the latter” (Ibid.).

To aid my analysis, I have categorized the films I examine based on how the film’s narrative arc treats burlesque performance - positively, negatively, or ambiguously - under the assumption that while the musical signs of burlesque may remain consistent, the meanings of these signs will change as the context changes. *Dance, Girl, Dance*, *Lady of Burlesque*, and *Stage Door Canteen* glorify and celebrate burlesque performance as a lower class form of entertainment that liberates the performers bodily and sexually from the constraints of society. *Applause* and *Coney Island* also present burlesque performance as a lower class form of entertainment, but cast it as a form that is destructive, crass and undesirable. In both *Gilda* and *Singin’ in the Rain*, burlesque is not foregrounded in the plot, occurring only once in each film. Perhaps because of burlesque’s comparatively smaller narrative role in these films, I find their value judgments of burlesque to be more ambiguous than those of the other films.

Listening to the Burlesque and Hearing a Sexual Celebration

The 1940 film *Dance, Girl, Dance!* positions burlesque and its horn-heavy, jazz-influenced music as low-class, fun, sexually liberating, and outside societal norms by treating danced reactions to the music as pleasingly involuntary and by contrasting it with string-heavy, orchestral-influenced music, here mocked as upper class, stuffy, and sexually constraining. In this film, Lucille Ball plays Bubbles, a woman who leaves a dance troupe in favor of a career in burlesque. In one burlesque scene, Ball introduces

herself as “a sweet young thing of 22... or so” who has “finished at Miss Snipping’s school, a model debutante.” The high strings and woodwinds in the pit orchestra vamp behind her mimicry of upper classness, interrupted by the horn slides and smears only when she “slips” into low-class burlesque, which is celebrated here as a liberation of the body and the music. Bubbles begins to dance the first time the horns come in during her comic monologue, and when they pause in their playing she scolds them, “Aw, cut it out fellas!” The horns come back in and Bubbles, heading to the middle of the stage, breaks into a burlesque song and dance routine called “The Jitterbug Bite.”

The jazz-influenced, horn-heavy music to which Bubbles performs “The Jitterbug Bite” becomes that much more rhythmically and melodically free sounding because of the classical-sounding vamp that precedes it. The horns, smearing between notes in a way a piano never could and classical music would never allow, enact the rejection of performance norms that burlesque represents. The smearing perhaps signifies the celebration of excess in burlesque, musically sounding the unrestrained character of the performance.

With her performance, Bubbles celebrates burlesque and its horn-heavy, jazz-influenced music as an authentic, low class expression. According to the lyrics, when Bubbles hears the trumpet, she “gets the jitterbug bite,” implying that the sound of the trumpet compels her to move in this jitterbug-inspired fashion. Then, by asking “how can I be highbrow?,” Bubbles positions the music and the behavior it inspires as lowbrow. Yet the applause, Bubbles’ facial expressions, and the fact of the performance itself

clearly marks this space as one that celebrates burlesque's low-brow aesthetics and the uninhibited, "involuntary" responses its music inspires.

Simultaneous to this celebration, Bubbles, the musicians, and the audience are busy making boundaries around burlesque aesthetics. The introductory sequence serves to put highbrow tastes and classical music firmly outside of burlesque performance norms. Adopting a false upper-class British accent, Bubbles mocks the etiquette and constrained comportment she associates with the upper class. And, with the lyrics "Try to be a lady... but when I hear music, I get the jitterbug bite", she essentially rejects classical music from the category of music: classical music is not *real* music or else it, too, would make her want to dance.

While this film, directed by Dorothy Azner, features empowered White female characters, the film's racial implications still need to be problematized. Bubbles is predicating her departure from classical music on difference, and the musical "other" here is historically linked to Black musicians, composers, and dancers. Writing on a similar occurrence with ragtime in the 1904 song "Meet me in St. Louis, Louie," Susan Curtis describes how the lyrics - "We will dance the Hoochie Coochie/ I will be your Tootsie-Wootsie/ If you meet me in St. Louis, Louie" (Curtis 2011: 135)[3] - "offered broad hints about the need to cut through the cloying respectability of Victorian courtship and marriage" (Curtis 2011: 135). Concluding her chapter, Curtis explains how Irving Berlin and Louis Hirsh appropriated the genre and "whitened" ragtime through cultural

[3] In his chapter "When Cairo Met Main Street," Charles Kennedy notes that these lyrics also refer "to the attractions at the 1904 exposition." 293

palimpsest, erasing the contributions of Scott Joplin and Bert Williams "from the memory banks of most Americans" (2011: 141), and replacing those names with their own. As Bubbles implies with her performance, this music contributed to a radical and modern reorientation of American culture "in ways that would release hard-pressed men and women from demands that social conditions prevented them from meeting" (Ibid.), where she no longer had to be a "lady". Yet in her performance, Bubbles' body and rhetoric enact stereotypes of "black"-ness as uncontainable and irrational. Responding in this manner to music that references Black musical styles and aesthetics without allowing Black bodies to appear on stage, Bubbles' performance erases and denies any cogent contribution of Black creative agents to her performance of this genre. Of the pit orchestra, we only see two White men, the bass player and the pianist, while the rest of the musicians are out of sight. Thus, the "black"-ness and Black bodies the music here is meant to reference, as in minstrelsy's origin stories, "remain voices, [or here, music] without presence, imaginative projections" (Lott 1993: 58). As Curtis clarifies:

> ...from our vantage point a century later, it is also painfully clear that the liberation of Americans from Victorian individualism came at the expense of the lives and memories of the men and women who created it[this music]. Black creativity was crucial to the emergence of the popular music industry in the twentieth century, but that contribution was obscured because the talents and achievements of African American composers, songwriters, and performers contradicted the racial stereotyping on which the appeal of popular music rested. (2011: 141)

Part of the challenge with this film is acknowledging that while the film and Lucille Ball's character may be empowering for White women, some of the modes of

empowerment, here the music and dance, rely on racial stereotypes and contribute to historical erasures.

In a scene from the 1943 film, *Lady of Burlesque*, the burlesque performer similarly dialogues with the music and the musicians. Based off of the 1941 novel *The G-String Murders* by famed burlesque performer Gypsy Rose Lee, *Lady of Burlesque* is a murder mystery set at a burlesque theatre. In one of the film's opening scenes, Barbara Stanwyck, starring as Dixie Daisy, performs a song that offers a set of instructions as to what she wants to hear in burlesque music and what she does not want to hear.

After a large showgirl number, Dixie takes the stage. As the curtain closes to hide the set behind her, a violinist stands up in the orchestra and bows a slow ascending A-B-C leading up to a descending D-C-B-A figure, which he repeats several times while speeding up. Then, adding a flourish to highlight his classical training, he sweetly slides up to an A. The camera pans to a close-up of Dixie's face for part of this solo violin line, and we see that her lips are pursed. As soon as the violinist has finished, Dixie responds to his playing "It's beautiful, Junior, but it's not for me." The horns come in and Dixie proceeds with her musical number, singing:

Come on and give me heat,
'cause I don't like my music sweet.
I wanna feel my impulse beat!
[*on "beat" Dixie smiles coyly while shrugging her shoulders forward*]
Take it off the E String, play it on the G String.
If this gives you a thrill
[s*ung while Dixie shimmies her shoulders back and forth*]
It's happening much against my will
And only cause I've caught a chill.
Take it off the E String, Play it on the G String

[*Dixie points to the violinist and he shifts registers from high to low*]
What goes a lot goes when I do my act
Boys, it's a fact:
Whenever I'm applauded, you're rewarded.

Each time the drummer jumps,
[*camera pans to the drummer playing on a drumset*]
I get gooseflesh big as lumps,
I start breaking out in bumps
[*horn and drum hits as strategic cuts and gratuitous applause visually and aurally imply that Dixie "bumps," pounding both of her fists in the air with every hit. however, we do not actually* see *her bumping.*]

Brother, I'm makin' my eggs and bacon
Earnin' my pay, just by shakin' this way
[*Dixie shimmies her shoulders*]
Four shows a day.

I'm [unintelligible] was
If you stole some dough
Now that ain't so
Cause if you lack attire it's the Black Mariah.
I know what you're waitin' for
And I've a mind to do some more
But I don't wanna break the law
Cause listen, Brother, I've got a mother, old and gray
I support her this way!
Four shows a day.
[*Dixie walk/dances across the stage for the rest of the number, removing her furs and this time "bumping" twice on screen to horn hits*]

Here, like Bubbles, Dixie presents her danced reaction to the music as outside of her control, occurring "just because [she] got a chill." She later links this chill directly to the music, singing that hearing the drum gives her goosebumps, and burlesque again is positioned as a breaking free of behavioral norms. Musically, the sole violin player

assumes a similar functional role to the classical sounding vamp in *Dance, Girl, Dance*! Dixie rejects the music played by the violinist as uninspiring, singing "Come on and give me heat, 'cause I don't like my music sweet." The orchestra, playing from the pit, swings the beat, and we hear the brass section loud and clear, signifying the "heat" of hot jazz and acting as a foil to the classical strains of a violin. Dixie also instructs the violinist to play in a lower register, with the song's title line and double entendre "Take it off the E string, play it on the G-string," and he complies. So, here, music for burlesque must be "hot," another double entendre alluding not just to jazz but also to the sexual - something I will return to in a minute. And, if it features strings at all, they must play in a lower register. What Dixie excludes from burlesque is music that is "sweet," a word Bubbles also used to refer to her upper-class alter ego. "Sweet" sounding music, then perhaps refers to music that naively conforms to social norms, or is too "beautiful" like the violinist's introduction. Even though the violinist glides up to his last note, sliding between notes like the horns, it's just a regular old portamento and the pitch is much too high. For Dixie, his sliding is not rebellious or sexy like the horn smears, but sweet and conforming to classical music's conventions.

"Hot" jazz's associations with sex and an inability to restrain oneself also has decidedly racial undertones. Admittedly, burlesque does have a history of rejecting restraint, and a refusal of containment, for instance by inverting and mocking the function of the corset. However, tying this lack of restraint to the nature of the music rather than to the nature of the performer for me implies that something else is at work. As Dixie's rejection of portamento shows, simply sliding between notes is not enough to signal the

excesses of burlesque - the sliding must be in the horns, and the music must be "hot." Coming from a White performer and directed to a White audience, these preferences seem to me to be another instance of exoticization and hypersexualization of Black bodies and Black musical forms. Burlesque, which drew influences from vaudeville, minstrel shows, and dance troupes, was certainly no stranger to exoticism and racism. According to Sobel's *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* a belly dancer who called herself Little Egypt was one of the performers who garnered the most attention at the 1893 World's Fair and sparked hundreds of imitators in burlesque, coinciding with burlesque's rise in popularity at the end of the 19th century (1956: 57). Furthermore, during the variety show segment of burlesque shows, performances in blackface were fairly common through the early decades of the 20th century. By marking jazz sounds as integral to burlesque's appeal, performers were also controlling the racial boundaries of burlesque. They were able to reference "black"-ness and the unrestrained sexuality it signaled for a White audience without including the Black bodies who might reject this characterization.

Almost absent of jazz and horn smears, a burlesque scene from 1943's *Stage Door Canteen*, may serve as an interesting foil to the previous two examples. In this scene, Gypsy Rose Lee plays herself, describing her striptease technique to a room full of men. Her tone is didactic and she talks about how she began to study the art of exotic dance by "learning ballet at the royal imperial school in Moscow," and how the art of Cezanne inspires her performance. Her smooth delivery and the classical music vamps behind her makes the joke more subtle than Bubbles' version in *Dance, Girl, Dance*. Yet

while classical music is primary in this scene, there are allusions to the standard jazz and horn smears of burlesque performance.

The classical music, which elsewhere signified a musical, aesthetic, and social other to burlesque, also functions in that manner, but here its instrumentalization in creating new norms becomes more apparent. While the classical vamps still do reference upper class-ness, they also serve to underline the pedagogical nature of Lee's performance. She is literally instructing the audience as to how the striptease of burlesque should be performed, and classical music is the soundtrack. When the horns do come in, prompting Lee to say "There's the music, that's my cue," it is only briefly, and the classical music that sandwiches it serves to neutralize the jazzier music's purported ability to overwhelm the artists and take over their bodies so that they display a wild lack of restraint. For Lee, the horn-heavy music has simply become a cue, and the norms of burlesque performance become the target of the joke.

Lee also directly references both her Whiteness and her purported upper class identity when she exposes one of her shoulders, asking "Do you think I take the slightest pride in the Whiteness of that shoulder?" By placing this reference to her race in the context of burlesque, classical music, and high art, she exposes the privileging of White bodies that links all three of these forms. Yet the "whiteness" of her shoulder also points to a class dynamic. If Lee were required to labor outside, her shoulder might have tanned with exposure to the elements and would then visually signify her lower social class. So, a White shoulder signifies not just race but also the upper class privilege of a life free of farm labor. Of course, Lee's profession also keeps her indoors and out of the sunlight.

Thus, displaying the Whiteness of her shoulder reveals a comical congruency between the life of a lower class burlesque performer and that of a member of the upper class, comical because the locus of similarity here is typically a symbol of privilege.

Listening to the Burlesque and Hearing a Low Budget Threat

The film *Applause* (1929) treats burlesque as a threat to Christian morality by investing burlesque's jazz-influenced music with the ability to inspire a particular sort of movement – movement that appeals to the here lewd and morally-suspect working-class man. *Applause* follows Kitty Darling, an aging burlesque dancer, and her daughter April, who was raised in a convent. Leaving the convent to come live with her mother, April encounters burlesque for the first time since she was a child. When she first arrives at the hotel where her mother is living, April recalls, "I haven't seen my mother on the stage since I was five years old, but I remember oh, she was wonderful!" But, upon seeing her mother perform, April's conception of burlesque skews negative. In this scene, jazz, horns, and horn smears sound the burlesque, but here they signal seediness and danger rather than social and sexual liberation.

As April and her escort Slim take their seats, horns are playing an up-tempo big band jazz piece, trombones jutting out of the pit orchestra, accompanying a burlesque dancer shimmying on stage. The audience is all male except for April, and as the next piece begins, April overhears the surrounding audience members make derogatory comments about Kitty. As other dancers join Kitty on stage, the music becomes louder and faster, and we start to hear horn smears. The band does not seem to be playing completely together, perhaps due to the now much faster tempo, and the bodies of the

burlesque dancers do not always appear in their entirety on the screen. In one shot, only their feet are visible dancing on stage while the backs of the many male heads watching them take up the majority of the screen.

Here, the male gaze and the music that accompanies it is represented as predatory. Close-ups of leering male faces, smiling burlesque performers, and shots of the dancer's body parts - legs, feet, hips, knees - serve to present this space as one in which the female body is objectified, reduced to parts. Yet it is not only the male audience members who leer. The musicians, too, stare greedily at the performers' bodies while they play, lending the music a predatory role. In the films that celebrated burlesque culture, the burlesque performer interacted with the music and the musicians in a teasing manner, sometimes telling them what to do like in *Lady of Burlesque*, and voiced their pleasure at the sensation of being carried out of control by the music. Here, however, the burlesque dancers' voices are weak and unintelligible, and the musicians and the music are collaborating to force the performers into a frenzy, playing louder and faster so the women will have to respond to the music by shaking their bodies faster. In the article "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," Suzanne Cusick suggests that music may act as a "set of scripts for bodily performances which may actually constitute gender for the performers and which may be recognizable as metaphors of gender for those who witness the performers' displays" (1994: 14-15). In this scene, then, because the musicians are all men, *Applause* may be suggesting that in burlesque it is men setting the scripts for the women's bodily performances and thus for their performances of gender.

Additionally, I would argue that jazz still references "black"-ness and lower class-ness, but "black"-ness and lower class-ness seen through a different lens than the films that cast burlesque in a more positive light as fun, uninhibited performance. Rather than exoticizing and celebrating jazz as a more "primitive" black musical form which therefore allows for a modern bodily expression free of Victorian society's restraints, jazz is presented here as dangerously out of control. The frenetic, escalating speed of the horn smears becomes disorienting, especially when paired with the quickly changing close-up images of men's faces, women's body parts, and instruments. The lower class-ness of burlesque is also highlighted in this disorienting scene, and interpreted as threatening and crass. Lowbrow is linked to low talent and low budget, as the musicians do not lock in to the faster tempo, the singing is nasal and weak-sounding, the choreography is not always together or even apparent, and the costumes seem to be of poor quality, lending the production an air of monetary want. The loudness and rudeness of the male audience members is mimicked by the loudness of the music, perhaps implying a crassness and lack of musical taste, but also imposing a large auditory presence. With sound, they claim the space as lower class and masculine, a move that April interprets as threatening. April's ultimate reaction to the performance speaks to this implied danger: as soon as the show ends, she turns to Slim, urging, "Let's get out of here!" and they flee the theatre while the audience around them applauds.

While it does not necessarily represent burlesque as a threat, *Coney Island* (1942) does cast burlesque as undesirable. Eddie Johnson, a man who is constantly scheming new ways to make money, takes over creative production at a Coney Island nightclub. He

transforms the nightclub from a low class burlesque venue to a successful middle class music club by forcing the headlining performer, Kate Farley, to change her performance style and as in any retelling of the Pygmalion story ends up falling in love with her.

After sitting in on a rehearsal for the song "Cuddle Up a Little Closer," Eddie takes over and tells Kate that he will just be rehearsing with her to work on the song because she "moved around too much. It was too fast and too loud." A rather unsuccessful rehearsal ensues, where Kate sings slower as Eddie plays piano, but she still sings "too loud," a quality Kate defends as necessary for everyone to be able to hear her. On the night of the performance, Eddie walks into the main room of the nightclub and we hear a brass-heavy pit orchestra playing the tune at the previous fast tempo. Eddie gets a friend to "tell them to play it how I told them to play it" and then finds Kate on stage right before the curtain is supposed to go up. He puts handcuffs around her ankles and her wrists as Kate resists, asking "What are you trying to do?" Eddie replies "Make a singer out of you." After pulling feathers and fake flowers off of Kate's dress and hiding her handcuffs with them, the curtain rises and a soaring string-heavy accompaniment begins, nothing at all like the horn-heavy music that opens the film. Kate begins to sing, this time quietly like Eddie had instructed her. In the orchestra, the horns are still present, but they are not primary, trading solo sections with the strings and woodwinds. The camera pans to the audience, showing a very attentive, silent crowd, and at the song's end, they applaud heartily. When the curtain has closed, Eddie comes on stage and carries Kate to the dressing room:

> Eddie: You know why they liked you, Kate? Because tonight you weren't cheap and gaudy
> Kate: Where do you get off talking to me like that? There are a lot of people around here who like me just the way I am, see?
> Eddie: Sure, you're the sweetheart of every clamdigger who drinks beer out of a tin can. But what about the boys who drink out of glasses? You're not their type, Kate. But you could be.

In this scene, many of the same comparisons are made between burlesque performance and performance of upper class tastes, but here the traits associated with burlesque are denigrated as "cheap and gaudy," while bodily and musical restraint is deemed necessary and desirable for a "classy" performance. Eddie marks several musical traits of Kate's burlesque performance as low class: the volume ("loudness") of her voice, the fast tempo, and her dancing. Returning to Allen's description of early burlesque as "a physical and ideological inversion of the Victorian ideal of femininity" (1991: 138), in this scene Eddie seems to be attempting to bring Kate back in line with the Victorian ideals of White femininity. Two sets of handcuffs stand in for the bodily restriction of a corset, and Kate must sing a love song soft and slow, musically displaying her feminine weakness by evoking a style of singing associated with the physical limitations of being corseted.

This scene also challenges the sexiness that movies celebrating burlesque associated with burlesque over upper class, "classical" sounding music. Eddie tries to convince Kate that people will find her more attractive if she sings "his way" - soft, slow, physically restrained, and backed up by sweeping orchestral sounds - than if she continues to sing and perform as she has been - loud, fast, lots of dancing, and

accompanied by a horn-heavy pit orchestra. Essentially, Eddie wants Kate to sing "sweet" sounding music over the "fun" sounding music of burlesque, and casts this "sweet" style as more sexually alluring. However, Kate is quick to point out that "There are a lot of people around here who like me just the way I am," and Eddie clarifies that this "sweet" style is more sexually alluring to those of a higher social class, "the boys who drink out of glasses."

Listening to the Burlesque and Hearing it Both Ways

Films that make a minimal use of burlesque, such as *Gilda* and *Singin' in the Rain*, foreground burlesque's utilitarian potential. The film *Gilda* (1946) takes place in an Argentine casino. First the wife of Ballin Mundson, the casino owner, Gilda, played by Rita Hayworth, marries previous lover Johnny Farrell after Mundson fakes his own death. However, Johnny acts spitefully towards Gilda once they've married, punishing her for her role in Mundson's death. Frustrated, one night Gilda performs "Put the Blame on Mame" and incorporates some elements of striptease into her performance to upset Johnny.

While Gilda has already sung this song once in the film, then accompanying herself on guitar, here the house band backs her up with a horn-heavy arrangement of the tune. The scene starts with just the sound of the horns, which we hear with Johnny coming through the walls of his office. The camera then shifts to a shot of Gilda, who walks onto the stage in a long black dress and black gloves, throwing her cape onto the ground as she makes her entrance. She begins to sing "Put the Blame on Mame," dancing slowly and shaking her hips from side to side whenever the horns come in with a

particularly loud smear. As Gilda sings "They said that old mother nature, was up to her old tricks," the horns play one such loud smearing gesture on "tricks" and Gilda, shaking her hips, exposes a long slit in her dress. During her performance, Gilda removes one of her gloves and references two moves common in burlesque performance, first the shimmy, with the lyrics "one night she started to shim and shake," and later the hoochie coochie, with the lyrics "Mame did a dance called the hitchie-coo, that's the thing that slew McGrew."

In this scene, Gilda's performance is intended to shock and anger Johnny, but I do not get the impression that the film or the characters are attempting to make a strong value judgment, either positive or negative, about burlesque. Rather, burlesque's utilitarian potential is highlighted, as it plays a functional role for Gilda. While Gilda's female body here becomes a sexualized site of spectacle, encouraging and requiring a gaze, Gilda and the song's lyrics cast this exhibition of female sexuality as a site of power. Because the horn smears and the striptease signal sex, Gilda knows she can exploit that association to her advantage, and the staging of burlesque becomes useful, an easy way to incite Johnny.

Singin' in the Rain (1952) similarly features burlesque just once, in a montage sequence with Gene Kelly as Don Lockwood and Donald O'Connor as Cosmo Brown. As Don recounts his rise to fame, the screen shows a much rougher rise to success than he describes to the interviewer. Beginning with a scene showing Don and Cosmo as children, we see them grow up and grow into different performance venues. After we see the two of them playing piano and violin in a bar, Don narrates, "Then we rounded out

our apprenticeship at the most exclusive dramatics academy." A quick shot of a sign emblazoned with "Amateur Night" fades into a shot of Don and Cosmo on a stage performing a slapstick routine as trombones blare and smear behind them, marking the venue as burlesque. Don and Cosmo dance with canes and oversized pants, then Don sprays water at Cosmo out of the end of his cane. Don's voiceover claims that, "At all times, the motto remained: dignity. Always, dignity," and both Don and Cosmo are pulled off stage by the "hook," a large cane expressly for that purpose.

While burlesque is obviously mocked as the antithesis of dignified performance, the style is not viewed entirely negatively. The horns, overly loud and comically excessive in their smearing, seem to index the comedy and fun of a burlesque show. The comedy is certainly lowbrow, but here the film points to both positive and negative qualities of this style of performance. The performers do not act in a "dignified" manner, and as the use of the hook to force them off stage displays, they may not receive much respect as performers. However, the burlesque venue does allow them a chance to perform for an audience, and provides a training ground for their future careers as performers. In the montage sequence, burlesque amateur night is positioned as a step above performing in a bar and a step below performing on a vaudeville stage. Situated in the context of this montage narrative of a progressing career, burlesque is represented as one of many intermediary steps towards more mainstream success. In fact, especially for the male comics of burlesque, this career trajectory was fairly common. As Sobel describes:

> Willie Howard, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel and other famous stars had great talents which entitled them to the highest recognition, but most of them started so young in burleycue, honky-tonk, dime museum, beer garden and variety that little is known of their early service... But whatever chores the stars of later days performed in burlesque, most of them strove to conceal their association with the outcast entertainment. (1956: 154-155)

As in *Gilda*, burlesque's functionality becomes the focus, and even though Don, like the stars Sobel describes, decides to conceal his burlesque history, the film does not judge burlesque as inherently negative or positive - it merely points to this hidden history and pokes fun at both burlesque and the way stars may try to conceal their ties to the form.

Final Thoughts

The two main musical topics I've discussed that surround representations of classic era burlesque in cinema can help to construct an idea of what burlesque of this era meant musically and culturally. According to the films I've looked at, burlesque sounded like brass-heavy "jazz," usually featuring horn smears and belting. This use of jazz and horn smears signaled an auditory departure from and rejection of high class taste. These musical signs referenced the low brow, the lower class, and "black"-ness. In a process of semiotic chaining, these social characteristics accrued meaning differently depending on how the films viewed burlesque.

In films that viewed burlesque positively, this musical topic was presented as a celebration of lowbrow tastes and bodily and sexual liberation from conventional behavior. At the same time, by framing the sound and nature of burlesque as one of

oppositionality, they set new boundaries as to what is normal or acceptable behavior, musical or otherwise, within the genre. Additionally, in movies that framed burlesque positively, jazz music was used to symbolically free the White bodies of burlesque performers from the constraints of normative behavior. In doing so, they implicitly referenced and contributed to racial stereotypes of "black"-ness and Black musical forms, especially hot jazz, as hypersexual and primitively unrestrained.

Films that viewed burlesque negatively framed the burlesque musical topic as predatory rather than freeing, and as crass instead of fun. While the use of jazz still signaled "black"-ness, "black"-ness was not filtered through the primitivist stereotype that implied liberation from society's constraints. Instead, as the use of music connected more to masculinity in *Applause*, the use of jazz called on stereotypes of Black masculinity as dangerous and unpredictable. This music also continued to signal a low-brow, lower class aesthetic, but in this filmic context low brow implied low-skill performers who played or sang "too loud" and "too fast."

The two films that treated burlesque performance more ambiguously used the burlesque musical topic to foreground burlesque's utilitarian potential. In G*ilda,* Gilda sings about how the burlesque dance moves, cued by the horn smears, were powerful enough to bring down a city and several men. At the same time, she mobilizes burlesque's associations with sex and a White body freed through the coded "black" brass-heavy music in an attempt to exert power over Johnny; burlesque and "black"-ness here are essentially tools to be manipulated. S*ingin' in the Rain* also points to burlesque's functionality. The horn smears, "too loud" and excessive, are used to comedic effect,

accompanying and enhancing a slapstick comic routine. And, by positioning burlesque within a trajectory of performance where it is the "training ground" for future success, the film frames the venue and whole enterprise of burlesque as utilitarian, re-telling the history of the musical film.

Ultimately, this web of musical and cultural symbols surrounding classic era burlesque has interesting implications in its own right: a similar musical topic connected burlesque across films that judged and contextualized burlesque differently, as did burlesque's associations with the lower class and its problematic deployment of a stereotyped "black"-ness. In the next chapter, I will interrogate how neo-burlesque draws from this web of symbols and meanings.

CHAPTER THREE

Neo-BurlesQueer/ing

Contemporary burlesque performers take inspiration from the music, choreography, and fashion of classic-era burlesque of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. However, most neo-burlesque performers are too young to have experienced this era of burlesque firsthand. They must construct their ideas of this era of burlesque through the lens of the present day, from the cultural relics and symbols that remain, such as film. Some burlesque performers have even pointed to filmic representations of burlesque as an inspiration. For instance, when asked what drew her to burlesque, Alotta Boutte, a neo-burlesque performer, responded:

> Gypsy, the musical. Singing in the Rain. I'm a musical junky and these two were my first introduction into Burlesque. Singing in the Rain presented the variety show aspect in a music montage with Gene Kelly. Gypsy presented the tease...not once do you see Natalie Wood in pasties. (Jones 2007)

As I argued in the previous chapter, these films and the others I analyzed established and circulated ideas on normative musical markers for burlesque performance.

Yet while contemporary burlesque performers draw inspiration from these earlier eras of burlesque, they represent their art as a revival that updates classic-era burlesque, in both performance style and politics. In this chapter, I will examine the extent to which contemporary burlesque artists queer the politics and performance of earlier burlesque through their choices of music and movement. As theorized by Judith Butler,

performativity allows for a focus on these choices at the micro-level and I find it useful to unpack staged performances as well as those of the everyday. Turning to queer theory to analyze the ways contemporary artists challenge some of the conventions of classic-era burlesque works particularly well, as queer "Like some postmodern architecture, …turns identity inside out, and displays its supports exoskeletally" (Jagose 1996). Annamarie Jagose provides a working definition of queer theory, where she explains that queer does not denote any specific identity, but refers to "those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (1996). Thus, queer readings allow for a focus on the work that goes into maintaining or subverting coherency of identity or ideology.

Using queer theory as a lens, I will address two separate yet related and co-informing questions: first, how is contemporary burlesque a queering of classic burlesque?; and second, can we read queer meanings in burlesque? In *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (2010), Whitney Davis explains the distinction between queering meaning – or, meaning queered – and queer meaning. Davis describes the verbal construction, queering meaning or meaning queered, as "…the 'queering' of cultural and social norms… this process of subversion and transgression or 'outlaw representation' (as Richard Meyer has called it)" (2010: 23). The adjective form, queer meaning, refers to a different process, whereby "homoerotic significance has not been excluded… [it] flows smoothly into and provides a manifest dynamization of the norm… even if it no longer constitutes its sole imagistic content, insofar as many other layers of significance have also been integrated…" (Davis 2010:

47). So, while meaning queered refers to the subversion of the normative, queer meaning looks to how queerness already informs the normative. Although Davis uses queer meaning to look at how the male homoerotic perspective has informed the normative, I will detach queer meaning from any identify category and look at how queerness as dramatized incoherency functions within burlesque. To answer these questions requires a focus on the contemporary burlesque body's movements and visual representations, as well as on the sounds surrounding, informing, and chosen by that body.

In contemporary burlesque performance, I see a recognition and unpacking of gesture as critical to reading the queerness and queering of burlesque. Thus, within my consideration of movement, I foreground gesture as a meaning-rich signifier. Jose Esteban Munoz argues that a focus on gesture both "atomizes movement" (2009: 67) and "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude" (2009: 65). Defining gesture as "the precise and physical acts that are conventionally understood as gesture, such as the tilt of an ankle in very high heels, the swish of a hand that pats a face with imaginary makeup, and so many more precise acts" (Munoz 2009: 67), he anchors his theory to "a case study, a living body", Steven Aviance, and posits that "Dance is an especially valuable site for ruminations on queerness and gesture" (Ibid.: 65).

Following Munoz, I am also anchoring my theorizing in living bodies by doing close readings of three particular performances, using gesture to look for queer meaning and queered meanings: Julie Atlas Muz's "Encore/Sun" performance, Bambi the Mermaid's "Lobster" performance, and Tigger's "Gender Surrender" performance. I will also use each of these artists to expound on and connect to other performance styles

contemporary burlesque draws from that contribute to this queering: performance art, camp, and drag, respectively. By doing so, I demonstrate the ways in which contemporary burlesque can be read as a queering of burlesque both within the scene and within each performance. Alongside this generic queering, neo-burlesque performers and audience members open up new spaces in burlesque for queer bodies and lives by destabilizing normative assumptions of relations between gender, sexuality, and biological sex.

Audience

Considering the audience is crucial in order to situate my readings of these performances in relation to audience reception, which is informed by the audience members' subject-positions. In fact, contemporary sources on burlesque often point to the mixed-gender audience as a site of burlesque's political updating. Whereas the classic era audience was almost entirely made up of working-class men, according to Simi Horwitz, writing for Back Stage in 2011: "the hipster, the professor, and couples on dates are far more prevalent on the scene today. In some settings, women make up 50 percent of the audience" (Horwitz, 2011: 2). Despite the more mixed audience, the male gaze and the extent to which burlesque can subvert the male gaze remains a topic of debate. In *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, Jacki Willson calls burlesque post(-)feminist and bemoans what she sees as self-sexualization and self-objectification that plays to what Laura Mulvey termed "the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the female body screened for the male gaze and male pleasure" (2008: 3). The title of her book, playing off a chapter titled "The happy housewife" in Betty Friedan's *The*

Feminine Mystique (1982 [1963]), is meant to similarly question "whether the burlesque stripper *is* happy or whether the overtly 'sexualized' woman is actually pining for something more" (Willson 2008: 7). Unsurprisingly, Willson's implication - that burlesque is inescapably demeaning and burlesque performers are smiling but unhappy - is not popular with burlesque performers. Kate Valentine, alias Miss Astrid, creator of a NYC burlesque and vaudeville theater called The Va Va Voom Room and a notable emcee within the burlesque scene, argues that "the best of neo-burlesque" creates a feminist space that rests outside of the male gaze. She described this space in her BurlyCon 2011 address:

> I love that the best of neo-burlesque presents a vision of female sexuality that lands distinctly outside of the white hetero-normative male gaze. It is so powerful and liberating to see women of all stripes expressing their sexuality in a fun and funny ways. I was always aware of this, even in the earliest days of the neo-burlesque movement, that it was such a relief for everyone (and that included the white hetero normative males!) to be able to explore their sexuality outside that narrow definition of what we are all supposed to find attractive. (Astrid 2011)

Also in this address, Valentine explained how more recently, "the neo-burlesque world has expanded to include not only men, but also the gender queer community" (Astrid 2011).[4]

At a burlesque show I attended in March 2013, put on by an Austin burlesque troupe known as the Jigglewatts, there were three men in the audience but their position as passive consumers and gazers was challenged by the male comic, a gay man who

[4] For me, one thing these comments indicate is that while the majority and the most visible members of this scene seem to align themselves primarily with second wave feminism, there is at least some recognition of and dialogue with queer culture and discourses.

"came out" as "openly Mexican". He re-mediated their normally unmarked roles between acts by flirting with one man who was attending with his girlfriend, addressing an older man who had clearly come to engage with burlesque as striptease without the wink "the creepy old man in the front," and closing the performance with the assertion, "If you identify as a heterosexual man and you've laughed at anything I've said tonight, guess what, you're bi!"

Tigger: "Gender Surrender"

In his performance, Tigger slides smoothly from one performance of gender and/or sexuality to another, blurring and interrogating the boundaries. Here, I am reminded of Judith Butler's work on performativity, and her insistence that performances of the normative are changed or challenged through (re)productions that slightly alter or stray from previous performances. With each action, Tigger claims a slightly different sexuality, effectively destabilizing any attempt to pin any singular sexuality on him, and drawing attention to the inherent inconsistency of gender and sexuality in all lived experience.

Tigger steps onto the stage at 00:30, dancing in a woman's metallic coat, dress, wig and heels to Cheap Trick's "Surrender." However, while he is dressed in women's clothing, his movements are not hyper-feminine as drag performances often are. Around 1:19, Tigger begins to perform a very girlish femininity, pretending to chew gum, apologetically removing and setting aside his earrings and gloves, and running with fast, quick steps. At 1:50, Tigger salutes the audience, striking a very masculine, military pose for just a second before turning around and stripping off the metallic dress, exposing a

tight, 70s styled men's workout suit. From 2:08 to 2:20, he performs what could be read as a hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity, stomping and assertively raising his fists into the air, before giving his middle finger to the audience. In one continuous motion, he brings his middle finger to his mouth, sucks on it, and pulls off the wig at 2:25. Suddenly he is cycling through a variety of movements: ballet-influenced karate kicks, boxing, adjusting his crotch. These movements meld into a highly sexualized, hip gyrating dance performance of a homosexual masculinity; the hip gyrating quickly becomes over exaggerated and less sexual. Tigger takes off his shorts, now nearly naked, sits on a chair, and rubs them over his body before breathing them in to applause and tossing them away. At 3:35, he somersaults to the front of the stage, kicking, dancing, and literally bouncing across the stage in a highly acrobatic stripper routine. Stepping off the stage at 4:08, he ends his act by kissing most of the audience members on the mouth.

By coming into the audience at the end of his performance and kissing people of all genders, Tigger both queers the standards of burlesque performance and allows for queer meanings within his performance. He completely breaks down the fourth wall, queering the normative order of neo-burlesque performance art, and engages most of the audience members in a direct physical and sexual experience. With this act, he creates confusion: about boundaries, about their physical bodies, about his own sexuality and that of the audience members, and about whether sexual desire even matters in this moment. In a very short amount of time, Tigger performs what could be read as asexual, heterosexual, homosexual, pansexual and many other experiences of sexuality that fall outside of the available names and definitions. Tigger's performance allows for queer

modes of being by pointing to the expansiveness of human experience and expression of sexual desire one can choose to draw from, whether one does so as Tigger does in his performance or not.

Bambi the Mermaid: a "Lobster" for Halloween 2007 at Theatro Circo in Braga, Portugal

Bambi the Mermaid's performances refer back to classic era burlesque, often using standard burlesque music and using her non-standard costuming as her gimmick. However, she still queers burlesque by incorporating camp, as she does here, and occasionally drag. Introduced as a performer from Coney Island, Bambi takes the stage at 1:00 dressed as a lobster. Kate Bornstein urged us to: "…look for where gender is and then you go someplace else" (1998: 14). A lobster, one would imagine, is a good start. Bambi immediately begins to play with this contradiction. In heels, she walks slowly and suggestively across the stage to Billie Holiday's "All of Me", juxtaposing standard burlesque moves with her nonstandard costume. At 1:27, Bambi begins to perform a classic burlesque move: removing her glove with her teeth. However, her "glove" here is a lobster claw. While Billie Holiday sings "Take my lips, I want to lose them", she pulls one of her pincers off of her claw with her teeth, and a long trail of stuffing comes out with it. Crying, she pulls off the rest of her claw, still using her teeth, and throws it despairingly to the floor as Holiday croons "Take my arms, I'll never use them". Pulling off the rest of her limbs, Bambi turns her back to the audience at 2:17, shaking her hips/lobster tail evocatively and glancing teasingly over her shoulder at the audience. At 2:41, she turns back towards the audience and begins to cry again, peeling off the rest of

her costume – chest shell, heels, stockings, bra, tail – while periodically bathing herself in butter. She ends her act with the lyrics "Baby, take all of me" accompanying a final self-dousing in butter.

Bambi's choice of costuming – a hard-shelled, edible sea creature – can be read as a direct question to the audience: Isn't it absurd to map gender and sexuality onto a lobster? The follow-up question could easily be: Why is it not equally absurd to map gender and sexuality onto a human body? Clearly, both can be done. By demonstrating this possibility, Bambi alludes to the possibility for un-mapping gender and sexuality from the human body, without offering her version of the unmapped in either case.

The absurdity of Bambi's lobster costume also serves to heighten the camp in her performance. Writing on camp in her 1964 book titled Notes on Camp, Susan Sontag explains, "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre" (Sontag as cited in Nally 2009: 625-6). Bambi's googly-eye antennas bouncing as she suggestively poses and turns from side to side, the sexualization of her lobster tail when she turns around and gyrates her hips – these instances in particular, in addition to the costume's constant destabilizing presence, remind the audience of Bambi's and their own being-as-playing-a-role. These moments highlight the absurdity and the constructed-ness of everything – the googly-eye antennas, the lobster tail, the gender and sexual desire Bambi and the audience maps onto them and herself, and the very "nature" of gender and sexual desire. I believe that the elaborate costuming requires further analysis, especially here, where Bambi has essentially created extensions to her body. Can costuming like

this be thought of as temporary body modification? I think that it could be thought of in this way, especially since all body modification is in effect temporary, and that this modification "queers the game" in thinking sex.

Performance Art and Julie Atlas Muz:
"Waiting for the Sun" at the 2010 Burlesque Ball

Frequently shifting the narrative focus of her performances away from either the tease or the reveal, Julie Atlas Muz presents pieces that are non-normative even within neo-burlesque. However, she has achieved both success and acceptance in the contemporary burlesque scene, as indicated by the media and scholarly attention she has garnered, appearing in the films *Dirty Martini and the New Burlesque* (2011) and *Tournee* (2010), as well as in Michelle Baldwin's book *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004), and co-hosting a burlesque-themed game show called *This or That*.

For Muz, who is based in New York City, an engagement with performance art informs much of her work, queering the traditional aesthetics as well as the class distinctions between high and low art. On Muz's personal website, her biography section describes her as:

> …one of the most acclaimed and prolific conceptual performers and choreographers in New York, [who] sucker punches the boundaries between performance art, dance and burlesque with dark, twisted, come-hither performances that have secured her place in the underworld of nightlife as well as the bastion of the art world. (Muz 2005)

Also on this page, Muz describes herself in the following manner:

> I consider myself a renegade performer whose work reaches across genres, venues, demographics and tax brackets to champion the notion that performance in any context can challenge beliefs and change behavior. (Muz 2005)

With words such as “renegade,” “challenge,” and “change,” Muz positions herself in opposition to the normative.

A description and close reading of one of Muz’s performances from 2010 will help to demonstrate how Muz queers the aesthetics of both historical and contemporary burlesque. In the performance I will look at here, from the 2010 Burlesque Ball, Muz enters to The Doors’ “Waiting for the Sun”, dressed in an elaborate, flashy gold dress, with a metallic sun and a bright orange wig on top of her head. She removes her headpiece and wig, lets down her hair, and lethargically twirls a few times on stage. Breaking into a smile on her last twirl, she suddenly swings her head and pony-tailed hair around in a circle before launching into a headbang sequence with the guitar riff. She comes up from the headbang smiling and lets down her hair. Alternately snarling and smirking at the audience, Muz bangs her head from side to side, checks her watch, and mouths what appears to be “f*ck” to the audience. As Jim Morrison sings “waiting” over and over, Muz repeats the same motion three times, putting her hands on her head then shaking her hair and headbanging. Interrupting the lyrics “Waiting for you to -,” Muz suddenly drops her dress before Morrison finishes the phrase, “-hear my song.” Now wearing only red pasties and a neckpiece with long golden strands attached that trail down on all sides of her, Muz twirls the golden strands and pulls at one of the tassels on her pasty. With the lyrics, “This is the strangest life I’ve ever known,” Muz removes her neckpiece, holding it above her head and slowly twirling so the glittering strands fan out from it. Right as Morrison screams “No!” and the guitar riff comes back, Muz throws

herself to her knees and slides across stage twirling her tassels, going into the splits the second she arrives before standing up, smiling, running to the other side of the stage, and repeating her knee-slide tassel twirling. This time as she stands, she grabs onto a metal bar and comes up halfway to spank her ass, throw her hair back, and quickly run to the back of the stage to slide and twirl to the front of the stage once more. Having cycled through a series of sexually charged and gendered gestures that reference tropes of stripper, porn star, rock star, ballerina, and classical burlesque performance in around three minutes, Muz holds her arm to her head indicating her exhaustion as she kneels on center stage. Licking her hand, Muz runs it down her body as if to pleasure herself, but instead does a half-hearted splits before sliding herself off of the front of the stage and, displaying exhaustion on her face, walks off through the audience.

One way Muz queers the norms of burlesque, in this piece and in others, is through her costuming. Muz's costume is non-standard, featuring an oversized headpiece made to look like a sun, which she wears atop an orange wig with two braided pigtails evocative of a valkyrie character. While elaborate costumes are standard for burlesque, headpieces are not especially common and neither are wigs, which, when used, are not often removed during the act. Unexpectedly, when she removes the sun headdress, we discover that the wig was always attached to it, and it comes off her head as well, revealing her blond hair underneath. Whereas the surprising, the unexpected, the "reveal" in burlesque is typically accompanied by the rhetorical "wink," or the acknowledgement that what just happened was pleasurably surprising, Muz refuses to indulge the audience and display her "knowing." If a "wink" becomes institutionalized, then it could be seen as

another form of the confession, where, as Foucault writes, "truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" (1990 (1978): 61). In fact, much of Muz's piece seems to focus on the *exhaustive* nature of this obligatory revealing of one's sexual secret.

Another way Muz accomplishes this queering of classical burlesque is by failing to follow the standard form of a burlesque act. Her early costume removal is not typical of burlesque, or even of neo-burlesque. As Lili VonSchtupp, a burlesque teacher in Los Angeles, insists "The striptease in burlesque is not about being nude, but getting there. It's foreplay" (Horwitz, 2011: 2). So, whereas most burlesque acts culminate with the "reveal," Muz's reveal occurs about halfway through her performance and she does not treat it as especially exciting. The "climax" of the piece seems to be during Muz's vigorous knee-sliding, tassel-twirling sequence, but then that, too, is subverted by Muz's lackluster final splits and subsequent exit. She performs physical exhaustion on her face and body, cultivating the idea that she exhausted herself while performing and is exiting the stage because she reached her physical limit. Muz's gradual decline in energy stands in opposition to most of the performances I have seen, which typically end with a "ta-da!" moment, where the audience is cued to clap and congratulate the performer before they walk off stage. According to Judith/Jack Halberstam, we might "try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities" (2005: 1). By refusing to follow the standard form of burlesque, Muz performs alternate or queer temporalities that subvert burlesque's standard teleology and intelligibility.

The music, too, departs from the jazz-influenced, horn-heavy sounds of classical burlesque. The Doors' "Waiting for the Sun" features standard rock instrumentation of guitar, bass, drum set and male vocals. Popular music scholars have written about the electric guitar, featured in the bridge sections of "Waiting for the Sun," as a phallic symbol or as an extension of the phallus. For instance, Gabriel Solis cites Steve Waksman's book *Instruments of Desire* (2001), where Waksman "...shows how the electric guitar came to serve as a 'technophallus,' as an electric amplification of the (black) male apparatus – on stage and in the minds of countless young fans and wannabe rock stars" (Solis 2007: 33). A semiotic analysis of the fast, aggressive strumming patterns on the electric guitar indicates that because these gestures have typically served as a display of male heterosexual potency, the use of that strumming pattern here signals just that. Drawing from Susan McClary, we could read the hard, aggressive strumming as a masculine musical gesture subsuming a verse before it "thrusts" into the next verse. However, as McClary points out, these readings are context-specific, varying with place and time (McClary 1998: 55). The strumming pattern and the electric guitar's timbre read as masculine precisely because they have consistently been related to or accompanied images of male rockers and hegemonic masculinity.

In this performance, Muz's body problematizes the standard reading of male heterosexual desire, as do her actions. When she headbangs for four seconds of this guitar riff, Muz's body takes on the masculine poses associated with this music and with male electric guitar musicians' performances of phallic power, a move that I would argue aims to queer the semiotics of the song. By mapping masculinity and male heterosexual desire

onto her female body, Muz displays that gender, sexual desire, and biological sex can be disconnected and reassembled in different ways.

The vocals in the song can also be put in dialogue with Muz's voice and listened to with a queer ear. Following John Shepherd's analysis of timbre and gender, the vocal timbre in "Waiting for the Sun" could be read as a typical cock rock masculine timbre. Shepherd describes this timbre as:

> …hard and rasping… produced overwhelmingly in the throat and mouth, with a minimum of recourse to the formants of the chest and head… The sound relies on a highly constricted use of the vocal chords, presumably reproducing physiologically the tension and experiential repression encountered as males engage with the public world. (1987: 166)

Keeping this analysis in mind, I want to turn now to Muz's voice. While Muz performs, she smiles and teasingly opens her mouth, but never speaks, sings or audibly vocalizes beyond a mouthed "f*ck". Muz's act appears to have been intricately and carefully choreographed to achieve the desired effect, so I will assume that her silence was also a part of that careful choreography. By removing her own voice from the stage, Muz essentially creates a space for the vocals of the song to speak for her and through her. These masculine timbres, mapped onto Muz's female body, queer her performances of femininity. Simultaneously, Muz's female body, having taken the masculine timbres as its own, performs their production and so queers the naturalized masculine timbre.

So, if Muz's performance queers burlesque, to what extent can her performance be read as queer? Muz's performance here can be read as an attempt to disconnect her body from any singular gender, and from any singular sexuality. Her montage

performance of genders and gendered images of desire map a succession of genders onto her body, exposing genders and gendered desire as unstable and transitory.

The speed with which Muz cycles through these poses could also be read as a method of destabilizing the "naturalness" of mapping sexuality, and especially gendered sexuality, onto the body by refocusing the attention on the performative acts or gestures that signal specific genders or roles. The gestures become tautological; focusing attention on the performative acts themselves calls attention to the gestures as such and to the work they require. The accelerate speed of her performance could also be a way for Muz to limit or avoid the fetishization of her female body.

Further, Muz's interaction with the audience could be read as de-stabilizing the performance of gender and "biological" sex from sexual desire. The audience cannot be seen from this video footage, but I can hear many differently coded voices encouraging Muz throughout her performance. So, while Muz sometimes performs sexual desire, alone on the stage she provides no clear target for this desire – her sexual desire could be directed towards people of any category, every category, or even towards no one or towards herself; it is effectively queered.

Neo-burlesque performances do not always queer gender, sex, and sexual desire. There are certainly neo-burlesque performers and instances in the performances by Muz, Bambi and Tigger that reinscribe heteronormative or homonormative ideals on the body. However, I would argue that this occasional nod towards normativities actually aids in destabilizing normativity as such. By including performances and moments read as normative alongside performances that obviously queer gender, sex, and desire norms,

neo-burlesque shows point to the constructedness of all of these performances of gender, sex, and sexuality. The juxtaposed performances of gender identified performers and gender queering performers "energise each other, offering in the [course of the performance]--and who can say beyond?--the ambivalent reassurance of an unimaginable future" (Jagose 1996).

While neo-burlesque performers have certainly opened up new pathways of identification and performance within burlesque, their queer and queering meanings still participate in a normalizing process. For instance, the juxtaposition of performances to which I referred has arguably become a new norm for the format of burlesque shows. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at how contemporary burlesque performers enforce the generic and racial boundaries of burlesque through discourse and performance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Burlesque Normativity: Discursive and Performed Boundary Work

In burlesque's contemporary practice, performers generally represent their work and art form in a celebratory, positive context that highlights their inclusivity and transgression of norms. Yet while burlesque often attempts to challenge the normative, within their challenge they have created a new normativity suited to their own views of what and who should and should not be included in burlesque. First, performers' discourses relating to genre seek to demarcate burlesque, establishing codes that distinguish burlesque from other genres and that privilege certain subgenres of burlesque over others. Second, the stories that are told about burlesque, either in the narrative of a performance or in scholarship, create and maintain racial boundaries within the genre that generally privilege whiteness. In these ways, contemporary burlesque seems to be doing similar boundary work, creating and enforcing a new burlesque normativity.

Behind the generic category of "burlesque" lies a multiplicity of ideological projects. Every person who performs, watches, or imagines burlesque envisions something slightly different. Kant, essentially theorizing normativity or the "normal idea," described how the system of the mind reconciles conflicting ideologies or images to arrive at a normative conception. Using a visual analogy for the process, he noted that in the process of imagining a "normal idea" of a man from a thousand that one has seen, "…the imagination allows a great number of images (perhaps all thousand [grown men])

to be superimposed on one another, and... in the space where the greatest number of them coincide and within the outline of the place that is illuminated by the most concentrated colors, there the average size becomes recognizable" (Kant 2000 (1793): 118). So, the normative here becomes that which is the most commonly reproduced across the multiplicity of ideologies that constitutes any one thing or idea. Burlesque then, is not clearly bounded or demarcated, but gains form through this overlapping of ideological systems.

Generic distinctions are often deployed to discursively separate different ideological projects and privilege one over the other. Some of these contested sites of burlesque include commercial versus alternative/subcultural burlesque, classic versus "neo" burlesque, and professional versus hobbyist burlesque. Burlesque performers also compare burlesque with other performance genres, such as stripping and drag, which some performers include in burlesque and others actively exclude.

In my discussion of genre and generic distinctions, I want to focus on the margins of these systems, the contested sites that do not function as burlesque for everyone. In other words, I am not so much concerned with what burlesque *is* as I am with what burlesque *sometimes* may be. By focusing on the liminal spaces between burlesque and not-burlesque, I can hone in on the work that goes into maintaining the "center" of burlesque normativity by seeing the surrounding spaces as actively contested and in a process of constant negotiation.

In addition to these generic boundaries, burlesque performers contest what constitutes acceptable representations of race by enacting different narratives onstage. In

contrast, burlesque scholars, some of whom are also performers, tell stories that either reify or deconstruct the genre's whiteness. White burlesque performers sometimes reproduce ethnic stereotypes within the context of their performance, choices which critically engaged burlesque performers of color actively work against. Performers' musical choices can also be read for racial meaning within the narrative of a performance. As in the filmic representations of burlesque that I looked at in Chapter Two, White burlesque performers continue to draw mainly from Black musical forms or use recordings of Black artists, usually featuring Black women's voices, effectively narrativizing a desire for a Black disembodied voice without requiring a Black body's presence on stage. A discourse on specific, "sexy" movements "naturally" corresponding with certain sounds also trades on stereotypes of blackness as hypersexual. Finally, scholarship on burlesque, some of which has been written by burlesque performers, provides a mostly white story about contemporary and historical burlesque, which some performers are actively researching and writing against.

Generic Distinctions

In the chapter "The Ghosts of New Burlesque," co-authors Ellaine Aston and Geraldine Harris describe how normative codes of burlesque re-emerged around the new millennium:

> …in broad terms a (re)mainstreaming of new burlesque occurred around the turn of the century, facilitated by Web 2.0 and signaled by the publication of books such as Bosse's and Baldwin's. These not only drew public attention to it *as* a genre but established its codes and conventions, rendering it reproducible and hence marketable. (2012: 146)

With the publication of these books and internet sites dedicated to the genre, burlesque became intelligible and less marginal as a form. For instance, some dance studios now offer burlesque dance classes where a beginner can learn burlesque's codes and conventions within the walls of an establishment. Many of the generic distinctions that burlesque artists make are strategies that seek to reconcile this institutionalization with this iteration of burlesque's underground beginnings.

Commercial vs. Subcultural

As Aston and Harris explain, with the re-mainstreaming of burlesque, "critics and practitioners have attempted to distinguish between its 'commercial' Van Teesian/Pussycat Dolls register and the 'authentically' sub-cultural" (2012: 146). Chicava HoneyChild, founder of Brown Girls Burlesque, made this distinction in a discussion of a Dita Von Teese act she found especially problematic where she attributed the lack of more widespread criticism to Von Teese being "*above* the burlesque community, if you will" (Plaid 2012). Honeychild elaborated:

> I considered the difference between being an artist vs. an entertainer or, more accurately, [in your approach] are you an image-maker or a meaning-maker. A meaning-maker does research to gather information and develop an understanding of the subject. The resulting imaging is the fruit of that investigation. Creating from an image maker's approach places greater importance on the sensational than origin and implications. (Ibid.)

Here, Chicava HoneyChild essentially excludes Dita Von Teese from her vision of burlesque. Von Teese, for her, is an entertainer rather than an artist, a sensational image-maker rather than a meaning-maker, and is removed from the burlesque community by her mainstream success with the implication that she excludes herself by imagining

herself "above" that community. However, as co-authors Aston and Harris discuss, "while there is some separation of sub genres according to venue, in many shows 'commercial' pastiche still appears alongside 'alternative' circus, drag, queer and feminist burlesque. In fact, a 'mix' of sub genres has become part of the 'formula'" (2012: 146).

Professional vs. Hobbyist

Another distinction that some burlesque performers make within burlesque is whether someone is a "professional" or a "hobbyist," usually privileging the former. Aston and Harris noticed this work going on in London:

> At the 2007 Feminist Neo Burlesque symposium/performance event at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London (CSSD) and the Brighton Salon discussion in 2010 the duplication of acts, especially but not exclusively 'original' contemporary ones, was a subject of complaint by practitioners. Confusingly, this arose as part of attempts not just to separate the commercial from the sub-cultural but to make a further distinction between those who identify as both sub-cultural and as 'professional artists' and the 'hobbyists'. (2012: 147)

More recently, Kate Valentine clearly demarcated a difference between "professional" and "hobbyist" burlesquers in her 2011 State of the Union Address. During her speech, she maintained that burlesque needed to adhere to professional standards to maintain its place as an art, even if it is a "low" art (Astrid 2011). Valentine elaborates:

> There are two different arms of the current neo-burlesque world. One is the hobbyists, what I call Stitch n' Bitch burlesque performers. They are huge fans of the genre and they got involved because they wanted to explore their sexuality, their body issues, or their love of retro clothing. They wanted to find a community of like-minded, fun, supportive party people. Then there are the career professionals. They may come from a background in theatre or dance. Most of them pursue burlesque as their full-time career or in addition to their other artistic work.

> Both of these arms of the burlesque community are totally valid and extremely valuable. The problem is that they are often indistinct, or worse, the Stitch n' Bitch performers are under the impression that they are members of the professional group. Its [sic.] easy to see why this happens. These two groups are constantly existing side by side and on a seemingly equal plane. The burlesque world is a friendly and accessible place with a very D.I.Y. vibe. Additionally, as a "low art" it looks deceptively easy to do: Why, any liberated, cute gal who is willing to take off her clothes in public can do it right? In a word, no. (Ibid.)

By referring to "hobbyists" as "Stitch n' Bitch" performers, Valentine clearly denigrates this sect of burlesque performers. Interestingly, she points to the unclear boundaries between these two communities, citing the fact that "they are often indistinct" but she introduces this fact by framing it as a "problem" that only becomes "worse" when the hobbyists believe "that they are members" of "professional" burlesque.

Neo vs. Classical

The distinction burlesque artists make between "neo" and "classical" burlesque is highly contested in that some artists insist that it no longer exists, while others continue to discursively separate the two. I understand these rhetorical moves as evidence of changing meanings of the terms, where "neo" at first referred to the burlesque revival movement as a whole, then began to be a label for burlesque artists whose acts were more obviously queer and/or performance-art-influenced. "Classical" burlesque, on the other hand, generally refers to burlesque performances that either recreate burlesque pieces from the burlesque's Golden Age or align themselves with that aesthetic, styling their hair and makeup after Betty Page and other 1950s pin-up girls and performing ultra-feminine roles.

Recently, some burlesque performers have argued that the distinctions between "neo" and "classical" burlesque are no longer meaningful. According to Scotty the Blue Bunny, "People know what burlesque is. We need to accept it's completely cultural now – it's not neo, or a revival anymore. It's just Burlesque" (Devil 2012). Similarly, Immodesty Blaize claimed in a 2010 interview:

> Whether the word 'burlesque' comes to mean something else or not, it won't stop me continuing to do the kind of performances I want to do. Personally, I don't care too much for genre labels; classic, neo – it's all semantics at the end of the day – I just want to see something entertaining and done properly, whatever it's called! (Johnson 2010)

While I am skeptical about Blaize's rather blaze write-off of semantics and any potential importance they may have, I wonder if the neo-burlesque community still sees itself as such, or if they are trying to queer the genre of burlesque by refusing to be labeled.

However, while some burlesque artists may reject the distinction between "neo" and "classical" burlesque, others continue to treat the terms as indicative of different approaches to burlesque. For instance, at a burlesque class I attended in March 2013, the instructor discursively separated the two, aligning herself with "classical" and *not* "neo" burlesque. After explaining the need she sees to "check in with the audience" as if "yourself, the music, and the audience are in this menage a trois," she positioned herself and her approach in relation to these subgenres, clarifying "I'm more classical burlesque. I want to make sure everyone's comfortable. Some neo-burlesque tries to push people outside of their comfort zones. My burlesque is not predatory."

Burlesque Vs. Stripping

As I mentioned in chapter one, most burlesque performers and scholars rhetorically distance burlesque from stripping in the historical sense, and that distance is largely maintained in the contemporary burlesque scene. For instance, the instructor at the burlesque dance class, after pointing out the lack of discussion of 1960s burlesque due to its closeness with stripping, was quick to establish that burlesque was no longer like stripping, because "there is no grinding *on* people in burlesque." Other contemporary burlesque performers also implicitly position stripping as anti-feminist and male gaze- and pleasure-oriented. Candy Whiplash, for instance, "eliminates from her acts any connection to modern stripping, which tends to make most women uncomfortable, and she tries not to 'do anything that caters to males more than females'" (Baldwin 2004: 130). However, this anti-stripping discourse has also been challenged within the burlesque community.

Some burlesque artists actively refute this boundary between burlesque and stripping by working against the notion that stripping is inherently anti-feminist. For example, at a talk I attended in March 2013 entitled "Queer Feminist Burlesque," the performer/presenter claimed that there was no boundary between burlesque and stripping, as that would imply a good woman vs. bad woman relationship that works against queer feminist perspectives. Aiming to work against conceptions of burlesque as anti-feminist, she insisted that no other burlesque performer would make those distinctions between burlesque and stripping either, a stance which I saw as a political move to reframe public perceptions of burlesque.

Racial Boundaries

The legacy of minstrelsy and exoticization continues to inform burlesque as it is currently practiced and perceived. In the early twentieth century, burlesque performers appropriated conventions of blackface minstrelsy in order to perform gender more subversively than normatively prescribed. In the early twenty-first century, the legacy of minstrelsy manifests in various ways. As La Chica Boom, a neo-burlesque performer of color who founded and produces Kaleidoscope, An Annual National People of Color Cabaret, critiqued, "the audience is white. Almost everybody is fucking white. Backstage is mostly white, too" (Martinez 2011a). Based on the performers included in the film Dirty Martini and on the performers most easily found on youtube, the majority and the most visible members of the burlesque community are white. When thinking through the factors that may account for the whiteness of the majority of the audience members and performers, I believe that it is critical to keep burlesque's historical association with minstrelsy, ethnic stereotypes, and exoticization of "the Other[s]" in mind.

While I do not think that most contemporary burlesque performance could still be read as minstrelsy, the majority of performers are still white and many burlesque performances work to reinscribe that whiteness. Performances of racial and ethnic stereotypes enforce these boundaries by presenting a world in which people of color must be reduced to caricatures, an environment that is inhospitable to performers and audience members of color. The erasure of black artists' contribution to burlesque also re-inscribes burlesque as a site that privileges whiteness. For instance, contemporary burlesquers, most of whom are white, frequently use recordings by black artists in their performances, referencing an absent black body and replacing it with their own white body on stage.

Furthermore, scholarship on burlesque often ignores or minimizes the contemporary and historical contributions of burlesque performers of color, writing them out of the story of burlesque.

Ethnic Stereotypes

Often uncritically deployed by white burlesque performers, performances that draw on ethnic stereotypes or exoticization remain fairly frequent in burlesque. For instance, during my fieldwork in Austin, I saw several Orientalist performances by white performers that drew from "belly dance" and the dance of the seven veils. Another white performer I saw used her act to perform the Carmen Miranda, "sexy Latina" trope. In a 2012 article featured on the race and pop culture blog *Racialicious*, "Race + Burlesque: Dita Von Teese Dons Yellowface," the author and several other burlesque performers of color critiqued Dita Von Teese's "Opium Den Show," where she portrayed an Asian woman and contributed to Orientalist stereotypes of Asian women as hypersexual.

The discussion surrounding Dita Von Teese's "Opium Den Show" on *Racialicious* can help to illuminate both how acts like this that rely on ethnic stereotypes work to maintain the whiteness of burlesque and how burlesque performers of color are working to expose and subvert these messages. The discussion takes place between burlesque performers of color Andrea Plaid, The Shanghai Pearl, Chicava HoneyChild, Essence Revealed, and exHOTic Other, the last three of whom are involved in Brown Girl Burlesque. In Von Teese's act, a preview of which is available in the *Racialicious* article, she begins reclined in a glittery geisha dress smoking in an "opium den," her hair piled on top of her head, held up by red tasseled chopsticks and ornamented with cherry

blossoms. She disrobes as she pulls on larger tassels hanging from the "opium den" pavilion, later shimmies behind a partially transparent body-size fan, and ends the act with gloved red hands feeling her body as she grips the top of the pavillion and red confetti streams down from the sky. As Shanghai Pearl critiqued, "the act uses negative two dimensional stereotypes of Asian Women to invoke sex. The act has a mash up [sic] of many Asian cultures in the set, music, costume, and movement. Every 'Sexy Asian Lady' stereotype (China Doll, Geisha Girl, Dragon Lady) makes an appearance" (Plaid 2012). The music Von Teese chose also participates in this cultural collage of "Asian"-ness, incorporating "gongs, koto, and a loop of the stereotypical 'something or someone Chinese (or more generally Asian) is happening' riff" (Plaid 2012). As Chicava HoneyChild claimed earlier in the discussion, Von Teese seems to occupy a space "above" the burlesque community as an image-maker rather than a meaning-maker - and thus implicitly above critique. It would be reasonable to assume that Von Teese is permitted an exception and is able to enact these ethnic stereotypes from the safety of her mainstream success. However, I have seen similar though obviously lower production cost acts in Austin burlesque venues that trade in two-dimensional stereotypes of women of color. Thus, Von Teese's act is not an exceptional case but rather a more visible instance of the widespread reproduction of these ethnic stereotypes, the effects of which extend beyond the stage.

Shangai Pearl and exHOTic Other both commented on what is at stake in these reproductions of ethnic stereotypes: physical and institutional violence and exclusion. Shanghai Pearl pointed out Von Teese's seeming disregard for the symbolic violence of

performing as an Asian woman, essentially colonizing that body, "in the very country that perpetuated the Opium Wars" (Plaid 2012). Thus, Von Teese's performance does not take into account the very real physical violence her act can be connected to, or if it does, treats it as inconsequential and/or located in the past. However, as exHOTic Other explains, the racial violence implicit in Von Teese's act contributes to an atmosphere that allows for racial violence to continue in the present. Referencing Said's work on Orientalism and the U.S.'s history of laws that target Asian people, including the 1875 Page Act which targeted Asian women as "undesirable" immigrants, in addition to the wars waged against Asian countries, exHOTic Other connects these historical moments to the present-day stereotypical representations of Asian people in burlesque and in art more generally:

> So, while in media and art [content makers] have people dressing in yellowface and making fun of and dehumanizing Asian people–creating, as Shanghai Pearl talks about, these two-dimensional beings–the actual effects of this behavior is it allows for actual real-life effects of laws being passed and wars to be waged against Asian people and Asian countries….
>
> [A]ll trying to say that art has actual effects on society: it did when yellowface was popular back in the day, and it continues to have real life effects today in a climate where there's so much anti-immigrant sentiment and laws continue to be passed. (Ibid.)

What is at stake then, is physical violence towards people of color, a risk and reality that Dita Von Teese's act seems to ignore.

Black Voices, White Bodies

As Dita Von Teese's show program elucidated, "the Opium Den show was created with her desire to build a timeless burlesque act of mysterious and fetishistic

exoticism" (Plaid 2012), and a similar desire for "black"-ness and Black music seems to be at work in the musical choices of white burlesque performers, although that desire seems to require that the bodies it refers to remain absent. White burlesque performers often use recording by Black artists, especially Black female vocalists, or musical styles associated with Black culture, so that Black music and voices sound from a stage occupied by a White body. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott describes the fear and desire tied up in minstrelsy that necessitated a similar disembodied Black voice filtered through a White interlocuteur. This sexual fear and desire manifested in minstrelsy's origin stories, which often featured accounts of the disembodied voices of Black men singing. In one such account, the author imagined "the hum of the plantation":

> [N]ow, anew, I hear the sound of those manly negro voices swelling up upon the evening gale. Nearer and nearer comes the boat, higher and higher rises the melody, till it overpowers and subdues the noise of the oars, which in their turn become subservient to the song, and mark its time with harmonious beating. ("Negro Minstrelsy - Ancient and Modern" 76-77 as cited in Lott 1993: 58)

As Lott points out, these accounts represent the black male voice as powerful and sexual, but require that black men "remain voices, without presence, imaginative projections" (Lott: 1993: 58). What's more, this account implies that Black melodies prescribe certain actions. In this story, the men do not choose to paddle with the beat of the music, but the song overpowers, subdues, and forces the oars - and by extension the bodies - to subserviently beat along with it. White burlesque performers' pervasive use of recordings of Black or "black" music can be read as similarly mechanized, where the music is imagined as more sexual than other musics, but the Black bodies "remain voices, without

presence, imaginative projections," and the music is assumed to produce specific bodily reactions in the performer.

As illustrated in Bambi the Mermaid's lobster performance in chapter three, some of these processes of sexualization of Black music and projection sans representation of Black bodies are evident. In this performance, she strips off a lobster costume to a recording of Billie Holiday's "All of Me," pulling white cotton "flesh" out of her claws in the process. In Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind*, Bambi is cited as one of the artists who never uses "new" music because she "prefers exotica or striptease music, something with drama and various points in the music to set a visual joke" (2004: 113). However, what her performance does not take into account is that burlesque has turned to this music because it was perceived as being more sexual or exotic, and this because the Black bodies creating and performing the music were sexualized and exoticized by the White, music and image consuming public - as well as by the performers, the majority of whom were and still are White. By moving Holiday's song to the burlesque stage and replacing her Black female body with her own White body, Bambi is contributing to the White audience's continued consumption of Black music, voices and bodies as hypersexual.

Historical Erasures

While the majority of burlesque performers have historically been White, most scholarship on burlesque completely ignores the presence of women of color and the contributions made by those who did participate and succeed. As I mentioned in chapter one, the narrative trajectories of decline or progress that most scholarship follows have

left out critical parts of burlesque's history. These narratives marginalized burlesque's relation to minstrelsy, including the role minstrelsy continues to play in some performances. Because they didn't acknowledge that these were performances of White people imitating people of color, these narratives also left out the contributions of people of color to burlesque as performers and as composers. On blogs and in print, burlesque performers of color have begun to point out and fill in these gaps to provide a more complete history of burlesque and change the discourse surrounding historical performers of color so that contemporary performers of color can better resist practices of tokenism or othering.

In her 2011 article for Racialicious entitled "Women of Color in Burlesque: The Not-So-Hidden-History," Sydney Lewis documents some of these historical erasures. Critiquing the omissions of women of color from books that depict burlesque pictures and history as "willed ignorance– ignorance, lazy scholarship, and yup I'll say it, racist brands of white feminism" (Lewis 2011). Lewis points specifically to several well-known and often-cited volumes. For instance, in Rachel Steir's *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (2004), burlesque performers of color were left out to re-tell histories of white burlesque performers:

> Out of 342 pages (not counting footnotes) purporting to tell "The Untold History of the Girlie Show," *Striptease* by Rachel Shteir contains less than 10 pages referencing black and brown performers. According to the index, "Race" is mentioned solely on page 32 and the iconic Josephine Baker merely referenced on pages 96 and 268. The words "black," "African-American," or "Women of Color" are not even listed in the index. Compare this to the 21 pages on Lili St. Cyr, 27 pages on Sally Rand, and a whopping 43 pages on Gypsy Rose Lee. Since a dozen films and

> multiple biographies have been made about Gypsy Rose Lee, hers is hardly an untold story. (Ibid.)

Other volumes Lewis critiques for presenting a mostly-white story of burlesque include Jane Briggeman's *Burlesque: Legendary Stars of the Stage* (2004), Bernard Sobel's *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* (1956), and Michelle Baldwin's *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004). Lewis elaborates on the implications of these erasures and exclusions:

> Historical exclusions are just the tip of a whole iceberg of racism that affects neo-burlesque. As long as the historical face of burlesque is porcelain then contemporary neo-burlesque performers will always be seen as exotic others, brown-skinned derivatives of Sally Rand, Dixie Evans, and Dita Von Teese. Despite what mainstream burlesque narratives might lead you to believe, our legends were not merely chorus girls for white headliners, thus contemporary performers of color do not have to be content with the ways in which that subordinate role continues to play out on the neo-burlesque stage. (Ibid.)

For Lewis, these exclusions demonstrate a prevalent racism behind much contemporary scholarship, which does not seek to correct the record by going to the black press's extensive documentation of women of color burlesque performers.

Burlesque performer Chicava HoneyChild, cited earlier in this chapter, has taken on the task of making the existing documentation of burlesque performers of color more widely available. She is currently working on a documentary-style film on the history of women of color in burlesque and in 2012 contributed an article to Ebony entitled "Black Burlesque: Live Nude Girls!" with the subtitle "The striptease art form has a remarkably rich past - and present" (HoneyChild 2012). Consolidating photographs, writing, and interviews featuring women of color burlesquers as documented in *Jet* magazine, *Ebony*,

and earlier historical sources, HoneyChild's article in Ebony reconstructs the burlesque history and suggests that, at least in the 1950s with Jet's 1952 launch, Black burlesque stars such as Lee Ta Harris, Rose Hardaway, Jean Idelle, China Doll and Betty Brisbane "had more press and widespread acceptance than their White colleagues" (Ibid.). The online version of the article features a slideshow of vintage photos of burlesque performers of color as well as links to performances by contemporary burlesque performers of color, including Chicava HoneyChild herself and other members of her troupe, Brown Girls Burlesque. HoneyChild's work serves as a starting point on which to build new scholarship that does account for performers of color and that can work to resignify burlesque.

The normativizing ideologies of burlesque are circulated in discourse, scholarship, and performance. They ultimately serve to enact boundaries as to who may participate in burlesque and what sort of participation will be privileged. The dominant narratives in burlesque scholarship and performance create and maintain racial boundaries that privilege Whiteness at the expense of people of color. Discurses relating to genre and subgenre work to separate burlesque from not-burlesque and to establish which subgenres will be privileged. In the next chapter, I will look at how some contemporary burlesque performers of color work to resignify burlesque through their performances by working within and against these norms.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mimetic Spectacle and Burlesque Performers of Color: Disidentifications and Resignifications

In this chapter, I focus on the critique coming from within contemporary burlesque, highlighting the work being done by burlesque performers of color to interrupt and subvert racist representations of people of color within burlesque. I will bring in the work of two solo performers, La Chica Boom and Vaginal Davis, who work within and against the currently circulating representations of people of color within burlesque. Perspectives from disidentification reveal how mimetic performances can radically resignify that which they re-present, opening up new meanings for sounds and movements. Further, a focus on disidentificatory identities allows contemporary burlesque artists to connect their work to earlier performers of color in burlesque and minstrelsy who enacted a similar disidentificatory politics.

The concept of disidentification provides a useful model for thinking through the work these performers are doing with/in burlesque. Jose Esteban Munoz provides a detailed theoretical history of the concept in the introduction to his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). A term developed by Michel Pecheux and mobilized by Judith Butler to describe how subjects are constructed by ideological practices, "Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against the

dominant ideology" (Munoz 1999: 11). Through disidentification, subjects can distance themselves from the parts of an ideology that they disagree with and still identify with the parts of that ideology that they find useful. Munoz elaborates on how "…this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (Ibid.: 11-12).

These performers, some of whom are also queer, enact a politics of disidentification as they actively work within and against the contemporary burlesque scene. Negotiating between themselves and the institution of burlesque, each artist determines the aspects of burlesque that they still find useful for themselves or their act while rejecting the white supremacist practices implicit in the form. These artists "embody alternative narratives and assert themselves in defiance of hegemonic pressures to self-police... [They] interrupt the white, hetero-patriarchal narratives of neo-burlesque" (Martinez 2011: 208).

La Chica Boom

La Chica Boom, a stage persona of Oakland-based performance artist Xandra Ibarra, engages with critical theory in her performances as well as in her personal and professional life. On her personal website, Ibarra writes that "La Chica Boom is a neo-burlesque project that Xandra began in 2002 to performatively question sexual/racial representation, queer formations, and compulsory whiteness" (Ibarra). Currently lecturing at San Francisco State University for Ethnic Studies courses, Ibarra dialogues with and contributes to scholarship on race, Latinidad, and sex work. In her performances, she

aims to interrogate "…the spectacular suffering and survival of fixed images/narratives that have reduced Latinidad to a list of hollow iconographic symbols" (Ibid.). La Chica Boom reorganizes these symbols within her acts so that her work becomes less about what Latinidad *is* and more "…about the spectacle of mimetic Latinidad as a disciplined and controlled existence" (Ibid.). On her website, she coins the term *spictacle* to describe her work, defining it as "…a personification of Mexican/Mexican-American myths and narratives that render the colonial gaze laughable; A masterful exhibition of spichood that interrogates modes of objectification" (Ibid.). In 2007, La Chica Boom founded Kaleidoscope, an Annual National People of Color Cabaret, to enact this critical engagement with race and burlesque on a larger scale. She explains:

> I started Kaleidoscope because I thought that neo-burlesque needed critical thinking about representations of race and minstrelsy within the genre of burlesque. I wanted us to really critically think about what we were watching onstage and how we were consuming and performing certain images. I also wanted performers to start thinking critically about ourselves and how complex it is to perform camp when you're a person of color. Because no matter what you're doing, you cannot escape certain historical representations and narratives about yourself. (Martinez 2011a)

Displaying a critical engagement with theories of race, sexuality, and politics, much of her work, including her recuperative coinage of the term *spictacle*, demonstrates how a politics of disidentification can be mobilized within a performance context.

La Chica Boom organizes her relationship to burlesque as a form around a politics of disidentification. In a 2011 interview, La Chica Boom describes herself as being "…on the margins of the neo-burlesque scene" to such an extent that "…a lot of neo-burlesque performers would not consider a lot of my work burlesque" (Martinez 2011a). In this

interview, she describes her disidentification with the genre, delineating what about burlesque she finds limiting and what she finds useful. For La Chica Boom, burlesque can be limiting because "…everybody is fucking white," there is pressure to be a "burlesque professional," which she implies is another way of performing whiteness, and "…it's really focused around sexual liberation within white women's terms" (Ibid.). Despite these limitations, she chooses to work within this form in order to work against the problems she sees with it. She explains that burlesque creates a space for her "…to unabashedly perform sexuality and race," something she felt was discouraged as "cheating for attention" in both experimental and traditional theatre, and allows her to incorporate comedy and "be silly" in her expressions of her sexuality (Ibid.). Burlesque, she continues, gives her "…a platform for performing what I call Ethnic Drag and Camp" (Ibid.). Disidentification with burlesque allows La Chica Boom a space to perform and resignify the form by presenting acts which push against mainstream burlesque.

La Chica Boom's work, much of which is organized around her concept of *spictacle*, also operates through a politics of disidentification. On her website, she writes that her "…hope is to perform work that is both against and engaged in the colonial gaze and nostalgia for Latinidad" (Ibarra). One of the *spictacles* La Chica Boom lists on the website, titled "Skull F*cking Cortez," demonstrates how she enacts and stages this negotiation. She describes this act as "an explicit sexual performance of my own colonial desire," and elaborates on this desire: "As a sexual subject inside real and imagined spaces, my sexual impulses and pleasures exist within and derive from colonialism. In order to 'want what I want' I have to be able to want me and my body as already inserted

with colonial contaminants" (Ibarra). A sequence of photographs from the performance demonstrates some of the ways that La Chica Boom brings in and critically interrogates iconography on stage, using her body as a site to interact with and recontextualize these symbols. The first photograph from the performance depicts La Chica Boom with an anguished expression, wearing a full white skirt, pasties, and long black braids. Behind her, a silver helmet, presumably Cortez's, hangs in a gold frame.

Figure 5.1: La Chica Boom, “Skull F*cking Cortez”

In a second picture, La Chica Boom has crawled into the frame. The helmet rests on her ass, exposed and facing the audience, a smartphone clenched between her cheeks. She's wearing heels, as in a third photo which presents a more obviously partial and fragmentary shot of the performance. Of La Chica Boom, we see only her legs, clothed in metallic silver fabric that evokes armor and matches the helmet. A miniature boat made of coca cola cans and splattered with bright red paint lays at her feet, gold coins scattered on the ground. Without having seen the performance, I cannot comment on how La Chica Boom contextualizes and moves between these scenes; however, I think the images and La Chica Boom's text speak to the ways in which she uses her body and/as iconography to connect the violence of colonialism to the everyday - the coke cans, the smartphone - and to her experience of her own self as iconographic.

A description of one of La Chica Boom's burlesque performances may help to illustrate how she mobilizes iconographic symbols to reconfigure their inherited meanings. In 2009, a crowd of museum-goers gathered in the lobby of San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in anticipation of La Chica Boom's performance, entitled *Dominatrix of the Barrio*. Marta Martinez, a graduate student of California College of the Art's Visual and Critical Studies Program, describes the experience in her essay "Baring Identities: Queer Women of Color in Neo-Burlesque":

> The main stage was empty when all of a sudden the 1940s rumba music began. Wearing a black ruched cape and a red-and-blue *lucha libre* mask, the star approached the platform. When she reached the center she threw back her cape in time with the beat, dramatically revealing her tantalizing ensemble: red fishnet from ankle to wrist that failed to conceal her blue glittered pasties. She was also adorned with a red silk corset and blue satin gloves that extended to her elbows. Untying the cape's bow at her neck,

> she slowly opened her arms, revealing her torso once again. Letting the top of the cape fall below her shoulders, she gave a few shimmies à la Carmen Miranda as she crossed the stage. Finally, victoriously, she threw down her defeated robe and looked at the audience in defiance.
>
> Following her victory over the cape, La Chica Boom's act took a turn toward the absurd. She carefully removed a black crop from behind her head. Maintaining her battle stance, she gave a few practice whips in the air. Since she was alone onstage, the viewer might have wondered who or what she would whip with her crop. She approached a mysterious object that until this moment had remained conspicuously concealed under a black cloth. Seductively, she removed the covering and revealed a colorful donkey-shaped piñata.
>
> She made a few laps around [the] piñata, surveying it from all angles, then put her ear to the donkey's mouth and quickly jumped back, adamantly shaking a finger at the animal, pantomiming refusal. After a few compulsory stretches, she relented and gave the donkey one solid "whap!" that echoed through the gallery halls. Then another! And after slowly dragging her tongue along the length of the crop, another and another—slowly building intensity as her performance progressed, typical of an S and M scene.
>
> After a few whacks, she walked around the front of the piñata, asked it a question, and carefully listened. The request seemed to take even La Chica Boom by surprise. She waved her arms as if completely taken aback by the request, before finally making the sign of the cross and proceeding to carefully remove her right satin glove, revealing a smaller latex one underneath. Supplying a generous amount of lubrication from her mouth, she inserted two fingers into the piñata, then three, then four. . .and finally, her whole fist. The audience went wild. The scene concluded when, after a series of thrusts, the piñata climaxed, exploding candy into the crowd. (Martinez 2011: 194-6)

A video of this act performed four years later and at a different venue, San Francisco's Supperclub "Queen," is available to view on youtube; the youtube version displays remarkable consistency with Martinez's description of La Chica Boom's 2009 performance. In her analysis, Martinez describes how La Chica Boom reorganizes symbols of Latinidad with her costume, which "takes seemingly distinct elements and

marries them to create the *luchador*/*a*/dominatrix. She is hyperfeminine with her fishnets, corset, pasties, and black stilettos..." (2011: 196) and simultaneously dons the hypermasculine/machismo luchador mask. As Martinez points out, La Chica Boom is not trying to claim a masculine identity by wearing the luchador mask; instead, she aims to juxtapose images in order to reveal "the impurity of all the categories her ensemble references" (2011: 197). However, Martinez leaves out of her analysis a discussion of how the music contributes to La Chica Boom's performance. While La Chica Boom is clearly recontextualizing physical iconographic symbols of Chicano/a culture in her costuming, her use of music also critically engages with racial and cultural signifiers through a politics of disidentification and challenges their dominant uses within burlesque.

A brief history of the song used in La Chica Boom's *Dominatrix of the Barrio* performance will help to establish some of the song's meanings for Chicano/a culture. The 1940s rumba song Martinez refers to in her description is Lalo Guerrero's "Los Chucos Suaves," which translates to "The Cool Guys" and was composed by Guerrero in 1949 (Munoz, Rosalia 2005: 15). The "Chucos" referred to in the title are the *pachucos* of the 1940s and 50s, "Mexican American youths in the urban Southwest who adopted a certain lifestyle that included the wearing of zoot suits, the tattooing of a cross on one hand, the use of a Spanish—English argot called *caló*, and membership in gangs" (Kanellos 2008: 847). The lyrics, sung in *caló*, celebrate the greater popularity of Latino and Chicano dance styles in the U.S. over swing, boogie-woogie, and the jitterbug:

Antes se bailaba swing, They used to dance the swing,

Boogie-woogie, jitterbug.	Boogie-woogie, jitterbug.
Pero esto ya torció.	But that has all changed,
Y este es lo que sucedió.	And this is what is happening today.
Pachucos suaves bailan rumba,	Cool Chucos dance the rumba,
Bailan la rumba y le zumba.	Dance the rumba and the zumba.
Bailan guaracha sabrosón,	Dance the tasty *guaracha*,
El botecito y el danzón.	The *botecito* and the *danzon*.
[x3]	
Cada sábado en la noche	Each Saturday night,
Yo me voy a borlotiár	I go to dance,
Con mi linda pachucóna.	To stir my hips
Las caderas a menear.	With my pretty *pachucona*.
Ella le hace muy aquellas	She takes on airs,
Cuando empieza a guarachar.	When she begins to *guarachar*
Al compas de los timbales,	To the beat of the *timbales*.
Yo me siento petetear.	I want to die right there.[5]

In her performance, La Chica Boom enacts a politics of disidentification with the music, identifying with some of the places and politics of pachuco culture while rejecting the heteronormative narrative and the movements that have been canonized as "natural" responses to this music. La Chica Boom's personal history intersects with the locations the song implicitly evokes. For instance, one possible origin of the term *pachuco* is the city of El Paso, Texas, which lies on the border with Juarez, Mexico and was called El Pachuco by smugglers (Kanellos 2008: 847); it also happens to be La Chica Boom's hometown (Ibarra, personal website). Some of La Chica Boom's politics also align with those of the pachucos, or at least the pachuco as imagined by Chicano Movement writers and artists in the 1960s. These writers and artists "saw in the pachuco a primitive rebellion against discrimination, as well as an existentialism that defied American and

[5] Lyrics and translation from Pomona College's "Zoot Suit Discovery Guide." http://research.pomona.edu/zootsuit/en/zoot-suit-la/zoot-suit-la-music/ (accessed 3-20-13).

Mexican national identity. Poets …invoked the pachuco as a model for creating a hybrid culture and for embodying vestiges of inherited indigenous culture" (Kanellos 2008: 847). While La Chica Boom uses different strategies than the pachucos, she is working against discrimination and questioning what it means and what it can mean to identify as Chicana in the U.S., often by placing inherited iconographic symbols on and around her own body.

Distancing herself from the pachucos of "Los Chucos Suaves," La Chica Boom moves to the music in ways that critique the trope of the "sexy Latina" dancer. As Martinez suggests in her reading of this performance, the Carmen-Miranda-style shimmy La Chica Boom incorporates early on "conjures images of sultry, sexpot Latinas, such as Carmen Miranda, whose signature shoulder-shimmy joined the tropes of Latina stereotypes" (2011: 196). This Carmen Miranda trope continues to be played out on the burlesque stage uncritically, as I observed at an Austin burlesque performance in March 2013. Wearing a long, white, tiered and ruffled dress, one performer shimmied across the stage to a brass-heavy salsa tune, evoking Carmen Miranda and the "sexy Latina" trope. La Chica Boom's shimmy here, though, contests that trope by alluding to it once during the horn introduction and then refusing it, never repeating the movement through the course of her performance. She challenges the imperative to move either in this particular Carmen-Miranda-esque manner to "Latin" music or in the dance styles Guerrero calls out, and spends the next part of her performance walking slowly but purposefully around the stage as a matador/dominatrix who has substituted a black riding crop for a sword and a pinata for a bull:

[6]

Figure 5.2: La Chica Boom as Matador/Dominatrix, "Dominatrix of the Barrio"


[7]

Figure 5.3: David Fandila, "Matador"

[6] Screenshot from "Dark Beauty Magazine DB LIVE TV "La Chica Boom" at QUEEN - SF Supperclub." Uploaded by DarkBeautyMagazine February 22, 2013. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy4FP1Pmslw (accessed 3-11-2013). 01:16.

[7] Photo from Catsoulis, Jeanette. 2008. "The Matador: 2008." Movie Review. New York Times. http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/10/31/movies/31mata.html?_r=0 (accessed 3-21-13). Subtext reads: "David Fandila in "Matador," about Mr. Fandila's quest to reach 100 fights in a season."

Having transformed into a dominatrix/matador, La Chica Boom next queers the song's heteronormative narrative, distancing herself from this aspect of the song's politics and again from movements that have been canonized as "natural" responses to the music. For instance, during the *gritos*, Guerrero joyfully encourages the musicians with cries of "Aie! Aie! Andale!" Recontextualizing Guerrero's pleasure, La Chica Boom enacts an S&M scene with the pinata so that Guerrero's cries seem to respond to her whippings with the riding crop. La Chica Boom then subverts the song's heteronormative narrative by incorporating queer, non-reproductive-oriented sexual practices into her performance. Guerrero sings, "Cada sábado en la noche/ Yo me voy a borlotiár/ Con mi linda pachucóna./ Las caderas a menear" ("Each Saturday night/ I go to dance/ To stir my hips/ With my pretty *pachucona*."), lyrics that place him and "his" *pachucona* in conventional gender roles. The story is told from the man's perspective where the woman is valued for her physical appearance, being "linda" and, later, dancing to the timbales; the woman's actions are thus only important in the context of the song to the extent that they are sexually arousing to the man ("I want to die right there"). In response, La Chica Boom begins to "stir her hips" in a way that suggests using a strap-on on the piñata as she fingers it. Guerrero sings the first two stanzas again, twice, while La Chica Boom indicates that she will use all five fingers and lubricates her hand with saliva. After his second time through "El botecito y el danzón," we hear three quick chord changes that build anticipation before Guerrero comes back in, "Bop!" - and in goes La Chica Boom's fist. The audience erupts with cheers, the piñata surrenders a piece of candy, La Chica Boom throws it at the audience, and the act, along with the music, ends. By framing her

non-canonical movements as reactive to the music, La Chica Boom implicitly critiques this mode of engaging with music be exposing multiple ways of listening and "reactively" performing. Imagining and performing alternative narratives in "Los Chucos Suaves," La Chica Boom makes space for alternate histories and modes of being in burlesque, including her own as a queer Chicana feminist.

Vaginal Davis

Vaginal Creme Davis - sometimes Dr., sometimes Miss - confronts her burlesque audiences with performances in blackface and enacts an extreme politics of disidentification informed by Vaginal Davis' unique subject position as an intersex, interracial performer. In a 2011 interview, Vaginal Davis elaborated on how her identity contributed to her persona as a performer. Building off the interviewer's comment about her talent at "…morphing gender, class and race, low and high culture, camp and politics," (Perlson 2011), Vaginal Davis explained, "I'm intersex, born with both female and male genitalia, so I'm a strange hybrid creature. I'm also part German, quarter Jewish, my father was born in Mexico and my mother is French Creole. People would always stare at me, so I figured I might as well just be on stage!" (Ibid.). On her personal website, Vaginal Creme Davis includes a short biography written by Dominic Johnson of Frieze Magazine which outlines Vaginal Davis' radical performance politics, referred to here and by Munoz as terrorist drag. Johnson writes of Davis:

> Ms Davis consistently refuses to ease conservative tactics within gay and black politics, employing punk music, invented biography, insults, self-mockery, and repeated incitements to group sexual revolt -- all to hilarious and devastating effect. Her body a car-crash of excessive significations, Vaginal Davis stages a clash of identifications within and against both

> heterosexual and queer cultures, and Black and Hispanic identities. From bubblegum songstress Graziela Grejalva to aging deviant John Dean Egg III, Davis's personas reject the internal counter-cultural mandate to refuse self-criticism, instead problematising the functions and assumptions of normative trends within the margins. By renewing uncertainties within alternative cultures and identities, Vaginal Davis opens up spaces for their continual struggle towards renewed and greater challenges, over and against these practices' timid appeasement and appropriation by the mainstream. (Johnson)

The language of this biography references Munoz's writing on Vaginal Davis' work as "terrorist drag" and as adhering to a politics of disidentification, here rephrased as "a clash of identifications within and against both heterosexual and queer cultures, and Black and Hispanic identities." In fact, much of Vaginal Davis's work can be read through this lens, as she both enacts it and questions the extent to which such a politics is viable.

In her blackface performances, Vaginal Davis interrogates the nostalgia around burlesque, probing the extent of the audience's supposed disidentification with minstrelsy and racist representations that much of popular culture from burlesque's "Golden Era" traded in. She pushes the audience into a productive discomfort that implicates them as consumers of minstrelsy. Kristian Hoffman, then-keyboardist for the Velvet Hammer Burlesque House Band, describes what it was like for him to see Vaginal Davis's November 2002 performances at the Velvet Hammer Burlesque in Los Angeles:[8]

> The most eye-opening sequence came when gender-indeterminate 6 foot 6 inch Amazonian Black genius performance artist provocateur Vaginal

[8] A similar performance from 2007 is available on youtube; although the sound quality is low and I cannot determine if the piano in this version plays "Camptown Races," Vaginal Davis uses the same script noted in the description below, wears a similarly fashioned chicken costume, and appears in exaggerated blackface. "Chicken Man." Uploaded by voighthead July 20, 2007. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEdaUvW81Zw (accessed 3-20-13).

> Créme Davis came out in blackface *so* black his features were indistinguishable, with big red painted-on clown lips and wee emotive inwardly arched white eyebrows, wearing a top hat, a ratty coat of tails, white gloves, a white ostrich feather tail, a mini-skirt of puffy white chicken feathers, orange tights and over sized chicken feet, warbling in an atonal Magaret [sic.] Dumont quaver "Pleeez don' beats me massah - aaahs yo' free range coon" to the tune of "Camptown Ladies," while high steppin' in a crazed Stepin Fetchit sashay down the catwalk, waving his white gloves in the air Dixie style. The sold out audience of overdressed swing dance & lounge core revellers [sic.], used to less confrontational fare in their retro pubcrawls, were dumbfounded, not knowing if it was correct to laugh, groan or protest, as the 7 foot minstrel chicken bounded up to the wireless microphone and squealed with unrepentant, white toothed glee: "Aaah knowz it's wrong, but it feeeelz so gooood!" Quite a departure from the suddenly quaint and *safe* cultural touchstones of sleazy burlesque queen strippers and Las Vegas grind Esquivel-damaged selections. The uncomfortable silence afterward was telling, but telling *what*? I *do* admire someone who can shake folks out of their decade plundering comfort zone, even if that decade plunderer is me! (Hoffman 2002)

Davis's performance as a minstrel "chicken man" references Bert Williams's early twentieth-century blackface performances where he dressed as a chicken, taking a White stereotype of "black"-ness to its extreme logic; instead of stealing chickens or declaring his love for them, Williams embodied one, "other"-ing himself to an extra-mammal position. As Hoffman implies by calling himself a "decade plunderer," Vaginal Davis's performance implicates him and the rest of the audience as engaging uncritically in nostalgia for this past era. In cultivating a nostalgia for the early twentieth century, Hoffman and the rest of the audience "plunder" from these decades by purportedly only taking what they want to see through the lens of the present day, which does not acknowledge the interconnectedness of all of early burlesque's contemporary cultural forms, including minstrelsy, which rendered burlesque intelligible and viable within that

culture. Ultimately, the audience's discomfort with Vaginal Davis's performance, evidenced here by their confusion over what constitutes a "correct" reaction and their silence after the act, pushes against the uncritical nostalgia that pervades burlesque and forces the audience to question if contemporary burlesque can ever break away from minstrelsy.

In addition to interrogating the nostalgia for the past that burlesque trades in, Vaginal Davis's performance can be read as positioning herself alongside Bert Williams, who himself enacted a politics of disidentification with the racial logic of his time and deployed blackface to these ends. A Black entertainer who became very popular for his blackface performances and his musical compositions, Bert Williams, born Egbert Austin Williams, performed exaggerated stereotypes of "black"-ness as a way of subverting and critiquing those stereotypes. In an article for *First of the Month* entitled "The Difference Bert Williams Makes," W.T. Lahmon Jr. elaborates:

> the important question to ask about Williams, as about other generative American pop performers is: How do their antics invert the dominant social signs they project? How might subaltern song organize liberatory values particularly when it wears blackface? Explicit nay-saying is less important here than the way much of the pop public understood that Williams's whole performance said No (steadfastly, if not in thunder), even while his apparent accommodation with the protocols of his time snuck his message past the censors. (Lahmon 2007)

In her performance, Vaginal Davis references Williams's costuming, "blackface and white lips, sometimes a ragged chicken suit, and always an enigmatic chortle" (Ibid.). Transporting the costuming and performative affects of Williams into the twenty-first century, Vaginal Davis reclaims Bert Williams as still relevant and present in

contemporary popular culture and demonstrates that the use of blackface was and can be deployed in a manner that challenges rather than reinscribes racism.

The mimetic resignifications present in the work of Vaginal Davis and La Chica Boom demonstrate how a disidentificatory politics can be mobilized within the context of a burlesque performance. Within her *spictacles*, La Chica Boom uses music and movement as critical sites of renegotiation as she re-mixes symbols of Latinidad and Chicana identity to make space within burlesque for her own history and subject-position as a queer Chicana feminist. Vaginal Davis, with her mimetic performances of blackface minstrelsy, explicitly connects burlesque to blackface and confronts the audience with the racist history mechanizing their nostalgia. By resignifying burlesque through mimesis, these performers connect themselves to a long history and continuing tradition of other performers of color who have enacted a disidentificatory politics on the stage.

FINALE

In writing, I have told a story of burlesque that has "lost its innocence" about the pathways of identification inherited from the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The stories I am writing against are those that uncritically and perhaps innocently celebrated burlesque as a performance style that allowed for White women to perform gender in a manner that challenged or inverted first the ideals of Victorian femininity, then those of second wave feminism. These accounts have muted certain voices that problematize these celebratory or nostalgic readings by pointing out what and who the celebratory narratives leave out. White women burlesque performers predicated their departures from norms of White femininity on racist performances of "black"-ness. These minstrel performances were enabled by a White fetishization of musical sounds and movements coded Black or "Other." In response, people of color enacted mimetic resistance through deliberate disidentification, which in turn led to a resignification of those movements and sounds.

However, without the aforementioned retelling that I have provided, the critique becomes unspeakable or unrecognized when performed. La Chica Boom explains how the audience's subject-position and the extent to which they are thinking about race critically drastically affects the way the audience reads her mimetic performances. She explains:

> If you are a critical thinker about race then you see things about race within my pieces and you're like, 'Oh, that was really cool!'… I'm generalizing and I'm assuming, but I think that the white audiences see a hot girl doing something out of the norm. And they see me using symbols

> that to them represent Mexican. Maybe not even Mexican. To them it's just like an undifferentiated mass of "Latino" performed.
>
> For a queer white audience, I feel like they see the *fuck you* in the performance. And for people of color, a lot of times it's a mixed bag. Some Latinas will come up to me, and tell me that I'm perpetuating whore stereotypes about Latinas…
>
> Some white burlesque performers come up to me, and say that I'm a hypocrite about race, because they say I perform racist performances about my own people, which of course is completely laughable to me. (Martinez 2011a)

So, if audience members and performers are unaware of certain discourses, performances like La Chica Boom's that work within and against burlesque to critique how race is performed within the genre risk mis-interpretation. I hope that my work here can open up this discourse on minstrelsy, mimetic performance, and resignification in burlesque performance so that burlesque performers and audience members lose their privilege of "innocence" in interpretation. La Chica Boom's performances, and other such performances that rely on mimesis to critique and resignify burlesque, lose some of their effectiveness, lose the "*fuck you*", if the meanings are misinterpreted.

I think there are productive conversations to be had around the performance of race in music and dance within the burlesque community, but those conversations will remain marginalized until the critique is made accessible to the performers and audience members it is directed at. Samuel Floyd in his article "Troping the Blues: From Spirituals to the Concert Hall," writes that "the purpose of criticism is to make artistic expression more accessible to audiences" (1993: 31). For Black music, Floyd holds that this entails "…the decoding and explanation of Signifyin(g) tropes – the figurative, rhetorical, and

critical devices from within black culture that inform the music… [S]uch tropings reveal textures that would otherwise go unnoticed or unappreciated, and they draw attention to the drama, progression, juxtaposition, and Signification of the idiomatic figures of black music making" (Ibid.). La Chica Boom explains that miscommunication results in an interpretation of her work as her "shtick":

> I think a lot of white people think I'm really annoying, because I always play with Mexican iconography and they think it's my shtick. But, we perform whiteness and white sexuality 24/7 and nobody ever says it's their shtick… I am Chicana; I am Mexican… If I happen to think about Mexican iconography, I think it's completely natural because it was my surrounding almost my entire life. So, yes, I have a humor and style that reflects my upbringing. (Martinez 2011a)

This misunderstanding stems from a willful lack of interpretive criticism in burlesque; one that neglects to take into account different cultural histories and critical devices, including those of White cultures.

While I have begun some of this criticism in the previous chapters, my subject-position as a White queer woman means that I am by no means the best-qualified candidate to provide a critical reading of, for instance, La Chica Boom's work. However, my academic training has positioned me to be critical and attentive towards representations of race and gender. This training allowed me to recognize the history of racism in burlesque performance that other scholarship had treated dismissively. Specifically, my training as an ethnomusicologist prompted me to see the choices of musical sounds and movements in burlesque as meaning-rich sites that require critical appraisal to understand how and what meanings might be transmitted.

Theoretical tools such as semiotics, mimesis, and critical theory allow for readings of musical and performed meaning that operate on multiple levels. Semiotics allowed me to discuss the historical meanings of jazz-influenced sounds and how those meanings transferred to the burlesque stage. With mimesis, I was able to discuss how burlesque functioned as minstrelsy through the mimetic repetition of certain sounds and movements. Throughout, I brought in critical theory to contextualize meanings, especially racial and gendered meanings, in relation to power. Thus, any semiotic meanings of music depend on who is performing and who is spectating; they must also take into account who is *not* being represented on stage or in the audience and how those representations connect to power. In the filmic representations of burlesque, the absence of Black bodies became a critical lens through which to situate the meanings of jazz and of the White women's performances of "black"-ness in these filmic spaces. Similarly, the meanings of mimetic performances change based on who is re-presenting. The mimetic performances of Vaginal Davis and La Chica Boom work to deconstruct and resignify that which they represent. In contradistinction, White burlesque performers mimetically perform "black"-ness or other ethnic stereotypes, thus engaging in cultural work that *reifies* these stereotypes and their own dominance. With these theoretical tools, and especially with critical theory, I was able to connect my critique to the critique that had already been coming from burlesque performers of color.

My project aims to be coalitional with those scholars and performers who critically engage issues of race, gender, and power in relation to performance. The scholarship of Jayna Brown, Chicava HoneyChild, Sherrie Tucker, and Marta Martinez

brings hidden narratives to light by focusing on the intersection of desire, race, and female performances of mimesis and minstrelsy. Similarly, the performances of La Chica Boom, Vaginal Davis, the members of Brown Girls Burlesque, and Julie Atlas Muz enact these hidden narratives and enlarge our world view. I offer my work to support their critiques and I hope that with these scholars and performers we can open up this dialogue on the intersections of burlesque, female minstrelsy, music, and dance to include how this history of racist representation translates to hiring practices and other off-stage spaces in burlesque.

As a White woman, perhaps I am particularly well situated to interrogate the performances of Whiteness in burlesque and to challenge the privilege that allows White performers to uncritically re-perform minstrelsy while reifying the dominance of White identities. As queer, I can position myself in coalition with queer performers of color, who share a history of dissenting and doubly-meaning movement. As Jayna Brown writes in *Babylon Girls*, "Robin Kelly reminds us that it is 'dreams of the marvelous' at the heart of rebellion and revolution, that our work can bear witness to the ways in which our dissenting movement has been and continues to be governed by beauteous wished-for possibility" (Brown 2008: 283). Ultimately, I hope that my work can serve as a record of the dissenting movement present in the bodies of burlesque performers who inhabit and perform disidentificatory identities *and* work against the mimetic performances that seek to re-establish and re-inscribe hegemonic relationships based on race by uncritically performing burlesque as minstrelsy.

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